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HASEKURA



WOLF & PARCHMENT

VOL. 5

NEW THEORY SPICE & WOLF

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WOLF & PARCHMENT

VOL. 5

NEW THEORY SPICE & WOLF

BY ISUNA HASEKURA
ILLUSTRATED BY JYUU AYAKURA





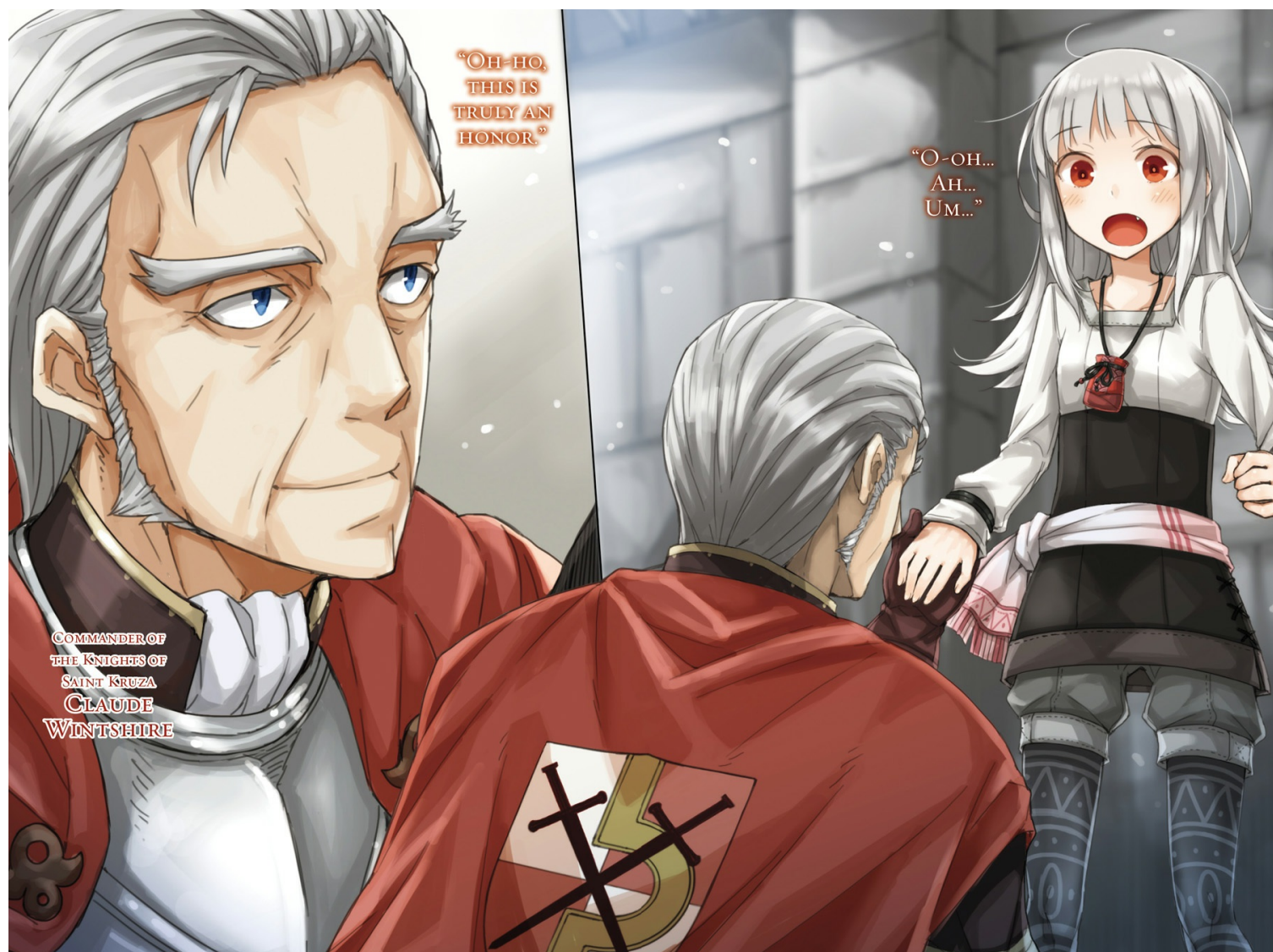
“TO THINK
THE DAY
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A SHEPHERD
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THE TWILIGHT
CARDINAL WHO
WALKS THE PATH
OF REFORMATION
TOTE COL

THE DAUGHTER
OF A MERCHANT
AND THE WISEWOLF
MYURI



"OH-HO.
THIS IS
TRULY AN
HONOR."

"O-OH...
AH...
UM..."

COMMANDER OF
THE KNIGHTS OF
SAINT KRUZA
CLAUDE
WINTSHIRE



"MY NAME
IS TOTE COL.
YOU MAY ALSO
KNOW ME AS
THE TWILIGHT
CARDINAL."

A KNIGHT-IN-
TRAINING FOR
THE KNIGHTS OF
SAINT KRUZA
CARL
RHODES

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WOLF
&
PARCHMENT
✿NEW THEORY SPICE & WOLF✿

VOL. 5

ISUNA HASEKURA
JYUU AYAKURA


NEW YORK

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WOLF & PARCHMENT, Volume 5

ISUNA HASEKURA

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt

Cover art by Jyuu Ayakura

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SHINSETSU OKAMI TO KOSHINRYO OKAMI TO YOHISHI Vol.5

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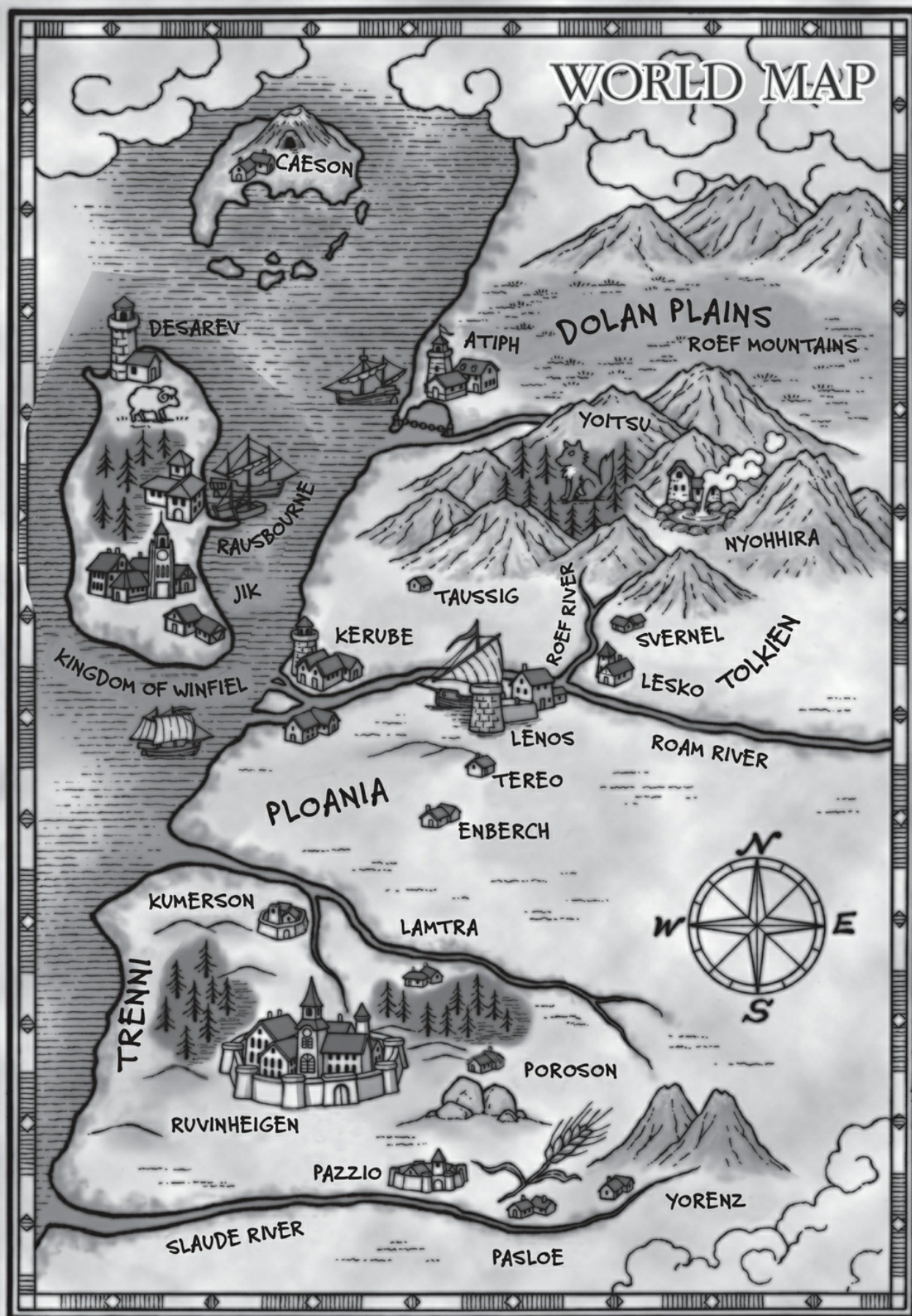
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Map Illustration: Hidetada Idemitsu

P ROLOGUE



PROLOGUE

It was the drowsy time of day right after lunch. A young teenager had sprawled out on her bed, humming as she kicked her feet.

She held a wooden pen in her hand, concentrating on nothing but drawing pictures on a waxed tablet.

Sitting right beside her face was a puppy she had picked up in town, watching her draw with great interest.

The open window looked out on a great blue sky. It was a clear sign that the cold winter was finally coming to an end. A gentle, early spring breeze drifted into the room, carrying the noise of the busy city.

It was then that he realized the girl's feet had stopped moving. It wasn't long before he began to hear soft snoring as well. The puppy tilted its head at the dozing girl before deciding to also lay on its stomach and go to sleep.

It was a calm, quiet, and peaceful moment.

He smoothed back the strands of hair that stuck to the girl's cheek, and when he moved to pat her head, the large, triangular ears atop her head twitched. They looked like the puppy's. He also could not miss her tail with its magnificent lay of fur being caressed by the faint breeze.

As he returned his attention to extracting the wolf girl's winter furs that had gotten entangled in the wooden brush he was holding, he fought back a yawn as he put on a troubled smile.

CHAPTER ONE



CHAPTER ONE

“Brother! Over here!”

Myuri’s voice cut through the clamor of the bustling, packed harbor, and Col just barely managed to spot her waving at him from the other side of the crowd. When he finally reached her after dodging carts almost overflowing with live fish and stepping over lines of strung-up chickens, she had already begun negotiating with the merchants.

“We need 180 yards of linen and 120 yards of Saava wool. What about Jord weave? Can you get 90 yards of that?”

Myuri stood face to face with three pudgy, middle-aged merchants who each had different kinds of fabric draped over their arms.

She carefully checked their wares one by one and called out order after order.

“I also want 120 yards of unprocessed white wool while we’re at it...and could you throw in 60 yards of hemp, too?”

The merchants’ eyes widened when she said that and they quickly began to voice their objections. Despite the much older, much heavier men looming over her, Myuri showed no sign of fear.

“What? Sheesh, fine. I’ll buy the red-and purple-dyed fabrics somewhere else then,” she said, crumpling the contract in her hands into a ball. “C’mon, Brother. Let’s head to the next place.”

She then grabbed Col’s hand and briskly walked off. The dumbfounded merchants briefly turned their attention toward Col. He was currently dressed in the trader outfit he used for walking around town, so he may have seemed like Myuri’s boss at first glance. However, the sharp-eyed merchants could easily see that between the two of them, it was Myuri who made the decisions. After an exchange of glances, they started calling after her, practically begging her not to leave.

Myuri, who stood with her back to the merchants, flashed a smile that only Col could see, then stopped and turned around.

“All right, I’ll order both red and purple fabric *plus* an order of gold thread and silver thread, so throw in an extra 90 yards of hemp!”

The merchants pursed their lips, but purple fabric was dyed with shellfish innards, making it terribly expensive and thus profitable. Crimson dye was made from a particular kind of tree bark shipped in from distant lands, which meant the red fabric was also rather pricey, so it would be a shame to let such an opportunity pass.

The three fabric merchants practically fell to their knees before Myuri, begging her to at least make it only 60 yards of extra fabric. Myuri, certain of her leverage, confidently responded in an idle, evasive manner and they ultimately settled on 78 yards in the end.

Satisfied, she obtained signatures from the merchants and wrapped up the contract.

“Okay, what were we getting next?”

Myuri asked the question as she tucked her quill behind her ear after routing several battle-hardened merchants with surprising ease. She wore the outfit of a company errand boy rather than her regular clothes, making her look like a full-fledged merchant in her own right.

Col followed in Myuri’s wake as they made their rounds in the harbor, and quickly found himself dizzied by the life and energy suffusing Rausbourne. His momentary disorientation was due to the sheer amount of people packed into the Winfiel Kingdom’s second largest port city and the fact that this was his first outing in quite a while. The dazzling sunlight that signaled the end of the cold season certainly played a part as well.

But the vibrant atmosphere of the city did not just come from the sun’s rays and the number of people; Col realized that the radiant expressions on the faces of the city folk were an important element. Laughter could be heard wherever they went, and even the standard angry bellows often heard in a port almost sounded like the lines of a comedy. It was almost hard to believe that this was the place where tax collectors and traders had clashed in armed

confrontations not so very long ago.

And beyond that, when the tax collectors had assembled before the cathedral in an open revolt, and the venerable merchants responsible for long-distance trading gathered at a tavern to hatch plots in private rooms, and the king of Winfiel mobilized his army, a great many people stood face-to-face with pain and sadness.

As Col looked out on the city, he thought about how truly glad he was that they had unraveled the brewing conflict. And that perhaps, as someone partially responsible for making it happen, it was okay for him to feel a bit of pride.

May the world find peace.

He could not help but clasp his hands together and give thanks to God as he appreciated the fine weather and lively city.

“Brother!”

As he offered his prayers while facing the sea, Myuri shoved a fresh contract into his chest.

“Look! I got us tin utensils, too!”

“O-oh, yes, I see. Well done.”

He looked down to see a contract detailing the purchase of several dozen sets of tableware at an exceptional price.

“Man, I thought we’d finally get to have some fun in town for the first time in a while, but you’ve been spending the whole time in a daze.”

Surely it hasn’t been the whole time..., Col thought, but when he considered how energetically Myuri ran about the crowded port, he figured that must be how he seems from her perspective.

“You can compliment me for all these purchases I’m making, or you could even hug me, you know. I don’t actually have to do any of this!” Myuri said chidingly, planting her hands on her hips and staring hard at him.

In that regard, Col felt very grateful, but also a bit guilty.

The reason the two of them were going around town and buying all sorts of goods was not to prepare for their journey, nor were they helping any company. This was for the monastery that would be built as a result of the settlement of the earlier uproar.

The Rausbourne Tax Collector Association, a fellowship of those who had been discarded by their fathers as illegitimate children of the clergy, had forced their way into the cathedral in a brazen act of reprisal. Though their anger was understandable, the pope was affronted by the blatant attack on his organization. And since the tax collectors relied on the collection permits issued by Winfiel Kingdom as grounds for their actions, their rioting had exacerbated the chances of war breaking out between the nation and the pope.

With little choice but to obfuscate the purpose of their breakin to avoid war, Col came up with the idea of claiming that it was not an attack at all, but a very passionate petition.

Though the tax collectors did privately run an orphanage, their financial situation left a lot to be desired. Col spun the story to explain that after their pent-up feelings on the situation finally boiled over, they fervently came forward to plea with the cathedral for permission to build a monastery for the orphanage.

While deceit was still deceit, Sharon, the vice president of the tax collection association, and Clark, the priest of a small parish that supported her, truly were paying out of pocket to keep an orphanage running. And since those children were the illegitimate offspring of clergymen, the cathedral did seem to feel some guilt when face-to-face with such concrete evidence of misdeeds.

And so, by getting a firm grip on a considerable truth and stretching the story as far as it would go, the commotion was laid to rest.

As a result, the whole uproar died down. All there was left to do was build a monastery.

It had been decided Clark would become the abbot and Sharon would manage the orphanage; together, they would offer help to children with nowhere to go, as they had gone through the exact same struggles.

“And so, that overblown chicken and your less impressive double lived happily

ever after in the monastery...Wow!” Myuri said with a bit more energy than was natural and looked pointedly at Col.

He had his own reasons for looking away.

“If only my brother would build a monastery for me. Then we could live happily ever after there, too!”

She spoke a bit too loud for just talking to herself. To drive her point home, she also snuggled up against him.

Myuri had originally come along on this journey because she said she loved Col not as an older brother, but romantically. He, however, only saw Myuri as his younger sister. Moreover, he obviously could not marry since he was aspiring to become a fully-fledged priest. Myuri did seem like she had come to terms with that at some point, but then talks of the monastery had come along.

She seemed to think that with a monastery, not only would Col’s dream of becoming a priest come true, but that she would also get something that resembled the married life she always imagined.

From Col’s perspective, he could only see a facility like that as a glorified fence to pen a flock of sheep—and more importantly, he would never consider getting a monastery built on such impure motivations. Either way, he still had far too much to do to withdraw behind walls of stone so soon.

More and more people were calling him the Twilight Cardinal, and whether he liked it or not, his actions were making waves across the world. It was his responsibility to at least see things through before he decided his own future.

Though he had explained this to Myuri over and over, the teasing remarks she made whenever she had the chance bothered him more than they should have.

Col was still struggling to clarify their relationship and that shortcoming meant he was in no place to judge. In their journey thus far, Myuri had consistently shown him how earnest she felt by putting her life on the line without a second thought. Whether he accepted how she felt or not, he knew he had a responsibility to figure out what Myuri meant to him and settle things in a way that she found acceptable.

And yet, whenever he started to think about what he needed to do, he was

bewildered by the absolute quandary before him.

“Well, the problem with going all in on monastery life is that it’d be hard to visit big cities like this anymore.”

Myuri stopped teasing and made a passing remark. Perhaps that was the biggest reason she never insisted too earnestly on a monastery.

“The occasional trip outside wouldn’t be impossible, but they are typically built in remote areas.”

“I’d suffocate.” Myuri drew up her shoulders. “I bet you wouldn’t mind, though. But mold’ll start growing on you if you stay locked up in your room for days, you know?”

She patted him on the back as she spoke. At the moment, he was wearing clothes on loan from Hyland and dressed like a young businessman, so he came off as perfectly presentable.

But it was also true that it had been almost a week since he had last gone outside.

After resolving the disturbance in Rausbourne and clearing the immediate issues surrounding the decision to build a monastery, Col was quickly embroiled in the all-consuming business of cleaning up the inevitable aftermath. They would need to conform to certain doctrines to properly establish a monastery, which involved following things like monastic regulation and founding principles. It was in these areas that he focused his efforts, since he could not contribute capital, nor was he very capable of laying the groundwork for the construction itself.

He should have gotten a chance to take a break once that work was over, but he had received a request directly from the cathedral. Archbishop Yagine had asked Col to continue his translation of the scripture into the common tongue—mainly in the hope that he would complete some parts that had yet to be translated while he was still in the city.

Col had been unable to make any progress on his translation work for some time now, and it was a distinct possibility that he would not have many chances to do so when they began traveling to the next city. The manor Hyland was

renting was the perfect environment for writing, and the city of Rausbourne was not so big and lively that he was worried about letting Myuri roam it freely.

With all the stars seemingly aligned Col had been taking the opportunity to absorb himself in his work.

It was only since the previous night that he had finally finished translating. More precisely, it was in the deep of night, when nearly every living creature was fast asleep, that he crawled into the bed that Myuri had vacated to run an errand. Before long, and for the first time in many days, Col was fast asleep in a place that was not his desk.

When he awoke, Myuri had threatened to cry if he did not go out on the town with her. And so we return to the present.

“Out of curiosity, how much shopping do we have left to do?”

“Hmm? Here’s the list. We’re practically done.”

Col peered down at the bundle of papers she showed him and scanned through the massive list of provisions.

Some might assume a stone building filled with nothing but copies of the scripture and candles would suffice for a monastery, but that was not the case at all.

Even when it came to just clothes for the monks, precisely what they wore differed depending on rank, as did the colors of their sashes. That meant the quality of fabric had to be properly differentiated, which in turn meant the threads used for those fabrics varied as well. All these variations entailed procuring many sets of clothes. Even when considering just a few of the myriad necessities like furniture, candelabras to house the candles, and incense used for prayer, there was an astonishing number of things that had to be acquired.

It was Eve who ended up offering loans for all of the monastery’s necessities, but she had no intention of going out of her way to personally purchase all these odds and ends, so Myuri had taken on the job.

Myuri crossed out the items she had already procured, noting quantities, costs, and the name of the merchant or artisan beside each purchase.

“...You are an upstanding merchant already.”

Myuri’s eyebrows rose slightly when she heard his murmured praise, then she grinned with pride.

“Heh-heh.”

It had been some time since he last saw Myuri beneath the light of the sun and it dawned on him that she seemed a bit more grown up.

“That’s because I always had to eat lunch alone because of a certain *somebody*,” she said, pinching him lightly through his clothes.

Though she seemed like a selfish girl, Col knew that once he threw himself into some task or other, she was always considerate enough to leave him alone.

She pinned him with a disgruntled stare, so he smiled in willing defeat and clasped her hand.

“Then consider us back together starting today.”

Her red, jewellike eyes widened, and she beamed with a dazzling smile.

“Okay, so there’s something I want to eat!”

“All right, all right.”

Myuri tugged him along and he obediently followed as they walked through the harbor beneath a blue sky and to the chorus of seabirds.

The place Myuri dragged Col to was a type of food stall often seen around the harbor that would fry anything and everything in oil. For a small fee, they deep fried fish—the unpopular kind unloaded here at the port—and the bony parts left over from cleaning them.

Myuri never balked at expense, so of course she had not chosen this place because it was cheap.

Massive flounder bones, big enough that they almost had to be cradled with both arms, hung from metal hooks as they were dipped into bubbling oil. It was meant to be a show—in essence, a promotional stunt.

When Myuri shouted out that she was going to buy one, the stall keeper briefly paused in shock and then smiled, encouraging the crowd to applaud the

courageous girl; the other patrons and onlookers did just that.

“I didn’t think I could finish it myself, so I wanted to try it with you.”

When she beamed at him like that, it was impossible to say no; and though he honestly doubted he would be much help, Col paid the two bronze pieces and accepted the flounder bones. Unlike himself who, sure enough, got heartburn after going through one fin and a few ribs, Myuri apparently could not get enough of the crunchy fatter bones, the aroma of the oil, and the enjoyable bite of the salt.

They wound their way onto an empty pier and sat down facing the sea. Myuri began to gleefully kick her feet as she bit into more flounder bones that were nearly three times as big as her own face.

“I can feel my heartburn getting worse just from watching you...”

“Hmm?”

The bones had been repeatedly dipped head-first into oil and then left to fry for quite a long time, infusing them with rich flavor. The oil left a lustrous sheen on her lips as she continued eating. As someone who had no confidence in his own stomach, Col almost admired her tenacity.

“Here, I bought some bread as well.”

“Thanks!”

Myuri accepted the bread and bit into it as though it was to wipe away the oil. An odd sensation came over him as he stood next to her, eating his own loaf of bread—he felt like he was realizing all over again that she was indeed a wolf girl.

With the brilliant sky stretched overhead and the slight breeze blowing through the harbor, it was the very picture of peace. In the distance, he could see ships with massive sails crowded together offshore, exchanging cargo with a cluster of barges.

It was a sight that made him consider how every large vessel bobbing out there had arrived here after their own arduous journey across the sea, and he began to understand that the world was surely much bigger than he could

possibly imagine.

“Hey, Brother?”

When all she had left of the flounder bones was the tail and the few spine bits, Myuri took what seemed like a satisfied swig from her waterskin before speaking up again.

“What kind of city are we going to next? Are we heading even farther south?”

The end of her sentence came with a little burp. Col frowned to emphasize how improper that was for a girl her age, but she brushed it off with a smile.

It seemed it would be a long while yet before she was fit for polite society.

“I suppose we’ll find out soon. Heir Hyland will likely have orders for us once she returns.”

“Hmm. The people at the manor said she’s probably gonna be back today or so. I guess we can just ask then.”

“What? Did they really say that?” Col asked in surprise, to which Myuri responded with a shrug, almost as though she was sorry for him.

“How would you ever make it in the world without me?”

He could not deny that it was absolutely true that he had left all sorts of things in her care.

As Col reflected on how he needed to get his act together, Myuri hunched over to bite into the fish bones again, filling her cheeks to the point where it practically changed the shape of her face, before finally swallowing them all.

“Oh, right, I almost forgot to tell you.”

“...What is it?”

He was trying to calm the slight ache in his chest at the sight of her eating when she suddenly spoke up.

“An artisan told me that there are gonna be a lot of shops set up outside the cathedral starting today.”

“Ahh, at last.”

He knew what she was referring to.

The Kingdom of Winfiel had refused to pay taxes to the pope, who in retaliation then commanded all the clergy in the kingdom halt religious services. Rausbourne was no exception—for years, the cathedral gates had remained firmly shut, sacred duties abandoned.

But in the wake of the commotion several days prior, the gates were finally unbarred. Col had been one of the many who participated in the first mass in years. The people of the city celebrated the resumption of church services with great cheer, and crowds had swarmed the cathedral.

As a further result, he had also heard that the city would be reviving the cathedral gate market.

It seemed that today was the grand reopening.

“Just so you know, we will not be wasting our money.”

A market meant stalls, and stalls meant food.

Myuri finished drinking from the waterskin and looked at him.

“Okaaay.”

She wiped her mouth with her sleeve and offered him a response he did not trust in the least.

The front doors of the Rausbourne cathedral stood wide open with crowds of people continuously streaming in and out. Col had seen it just like this not too long ago at the first mass. While the lively scene warmed his heart, he immediately noticed that was only the beginning.

The square in front of the cathedral had always been a lively place, with well-known restaurants specializing in mutton and various other attractions. Now, though, it was also packed full of market stalls. And filling the remaining space was a veritable sea of people.

“This is amazing, Brother!”

Myuri was thrilled, but what brought Col relief was that there weren’t very many food stalls.

Almost everything on offer was related to faith in one way or another, be it candles for mass or small stone statuettes for prayer. And yet, among these wares were undoubtedly items the pair had rarely seen during their travels through the kingdom, due to its ongoing conflict with the Church, and Myuri studied everything with great fascination.

What she lacked in faith, she made up for with her devotion to fashion—Myuri immediately took to stalls selling tapestries, gloves, coats, head scarves, and all sorts of other products featuring the symbol of the faith. She had a grand time sifting through it all, trying on kerchiefs lined with tassels, or wrapping a bright red shawl embroidered with the Church's crest around her shoulders.

Though his lectures went in one ear and out the other with her, Col wondered if perhaps Myuri might one day find faith through fashion. "Shall I get one for you?" he asked, attempting to entice her, but she shook her head and returned the shawl to the stall owner.

"No. I don't wanna empty your wallet out too much, so it's okay. I don't need it."

After receiving the shawl back, the stall owner seemed touched by how considerate Myuri was, but of course, Col could not help but smile skeptically.

"I would be even happier to hear you say that at a food stall," he said to her as she grasped his hand. The rambunctious girl simply shrugged in reply.

"There'd be no point. We're saving money *for* yummy food!"

Though her answer hardly surprised him, he still sighed.

"I swear..."

"Eh-heh-heh." Myuri laughed impishly and drew closer to him before she said, "The stall I really want to look at is somewhere else. The artisan said there'd be a stall in front of the cathedral..."

"No food," Col warned, though he assumed his efforts would be in vain. Myuri flashed a toothy smile at him and suddenly began hopping in place.

"There it is!"

She grabbed his hand and forged ahead.

The stall she brought him to sold bits of cloth that ranged in size from as small as a finger to as large as a hand.

“These are...”

Myuri examined all the bits of fabric laid out across the stall with such intense focus that Col was worried her ears and tail might pop out. There were thickly woven pieces of wool, but also thin, sturdy hemp cloth. Apart from the usual Church crest motifs, there were also faces of men and women, as well as plenty of animals embroidered onto the pieces of fabric.

All of them were meant for one purpose.

“...Amulets, I see. Why have we come here?”

Myuri held no faith toward the Church, nor was she the type to rely on patron saints.

But she looked over the amulets in excitement, and picked one of them up to show it to Col.

“Look, Brother, look! It’s a turtle!”

There was an image of a turtle holding a ship sail in its mouth, and Col was rather surprised to see that such an amulet even existed. He doubted the Church would look very kindly upon this, considering how reverence of nature was associated with heretical faiths, but then the young stall keeper spoke to them.

“That coat of arms belongs to the Euran Order of Knights. An ancient order that was once active here in the kingdom and famous for their skill in battle at sea. Perfect for keeping you safe from trouble out on the ocean. And *just* the thing to keep the pirates away!”

It was the crest of a band of knights.

While Col was surprised to find such a thing on an amulet, Myuri had sunk her teeth into the stall keeper’s story.

“Yeah, that’s it! I came to see the crests! What others do you have?”

“Oh ho, we have so many more back here. Pick and choose any you like!”

The seller must have sensed the business opportunity, because a new crate was quickly produced from the back of the stall. It was stuffed with an almost shocking amount of cloth—every piece dyed with various crests and symbols.

“Whoa, that’s amazing! Are all of these knight crests?” Myuri asked, her eyes glittering, and the stall keeper cleared his throat.

“Many, many orders of knights existed in the kingdom long ago. Do you know why that is?” the stall keeper asked in a theatrical manner, and Myuri excitedly shook her head. “Then allow me to regale you with a tale. Long, long ago, the Kingdom of Winfiel was a benighted country, ruled by savages. But then, the great emperor, ruler of the ancient empire, gathered the soldiers of the Church and formed an order of knights who marched into this land. That marks the beginning of this kingdom’s long history.”

“Whoa! Did you know that, Brother?!”

Col had limited knowledge of the kingdom’s history. He placed his hand on Myuri’s head in order to calm her, then signaled the stall keeper with a look. Catching his drift, the stall keeper began to recite lines like a storyteller.

“Ahem! Despite how this was the great emperor of the ancient empire and these were the best knights the Church could offer, the war they waged to drive out the barbarians was a fierce one. This was due to the incredible range in climate and terrain found across the kingdom, which was so great that many said four distinct worlds could be found inside its borders. Back then, each land had several different kings—it was an era of warring kings who reigned over the lands they felt most at home in. The kings that ruled the north were proficient in battle even when wading through ice and snow, and the kings that ruled the east dominated in combat at sea. The kings that ruled the south were formidable when fighting on the vast plains, and the kings that ruled the west were masters of war within the steep, rugged mountains. Each of them fought in different ways, and each of them had their own talents. And because of that, the great empire and the knights of the Church operated separately for the duration of the long war against the barbarians. It was then that these crests were used by the knights.”

This was a part of history that Col wasn't familiar with, and it seemed like Myuri's tail would pop out at any moment as she listened raptly.

"After the current king's ancestor united the regional knights, all that was left of the old orders are these crests you see here."

"Wow, I had no idea...They're all so cool, though...!"

Myuri's reaction drew a look of triumph from the stall keeper's face, probably out of a sense of pride after sharing the kingdom's storied history.

"Hey, I heard that all the crests have meaning behind them. Is that true?"

"Of course, of course. Take this one, for example—a deer standing in front of a shield. This one belonged to an order that guarded a fortress nestled in the valleys to the west. The shield represents the duty of defense and the deer was a symbol of their skill in fighting on the narrow mountain paths. The order's core principles are represented here on the ribbon at the top, and the little ornaments on each side display status and lineage. There's a grail here in the lower right, which means they had notable ties to the Church, and over here..."

Myuri was listening intently as the stall keeper explained further. Though Col was frustrated—this was the only kind of thing she ever showed interest in—he understood why she had wanted to come here.

"I want to make my own crest. What should I do?"

Several days ago, Col had been going back and forth between the cathedral and manor every day, making sure all the monastery preparations were properly following Church doctrine. This was also the period he had been cutting back on sleep to continue working. Since Sharon would be founding a new monastery, the topic of needing a crest naturally came up. Myuri absolutely loved tales of adventure, so talk of creating a new crest was akin to presenting a hunk of roast meat to a stray dog. But creating a crest was different from making a sign for a storefront. Col figured that if they let her stay and listen in, she would wind up being a handful. In the end, he handed her a wax board and a wooden pen to let her draw whatever she pleased in an effort to get her out of their hair.

"Oh yeah? Making something for your own store in the future, is it?"

The stall keeper must have come to that conclusion since she was dressed like a trading company errand boy.

“Yeah, something like that. And so I wanted to take a look at a lot of different designs.”

“Hmm...I don’t think it’d be easy to draw it yourself from a blank slate.”

“Really? I guess I should ask an artisan to do it. I’m not really good at drawing myself...”

“No, that’s not what I mean,” the stall keeper said, scratched his head, then grabbed a different piece of cloth. “Take this, for example. This is the kingdom’s most well-known crest.”

“A sheep?”

“Yep. This is the crest for the kingdom’s Knights of the Golden Sheep, and if you just decide you want to use a sheep in your own crest, then...y’know.” He drew his hand across his neck like a blade. “A crest symbolizes your station in life. If you copy the royal seal just ’cause you feel like it, then it wouldn’t be surprising if all your friends and followers end up in the gallows. And these amulets follow a totally different format than real crests; these are expressly permitted to be used as amulets. So maybe the creeds at the top are different, or the ornaments placed around the image are different. You see the Rausbourne seal on the bottom right, yeah? You’d need special permission just to sell anything carrying that symbol.”

“Wow...”

“If you decide to make up your own crest and start enthusiastically hanging it everywhere, it’d be a catastrophe. Especially if you end up accidentally overlapping with a noble family from somewhere.”

“Are they gonna find out if you overlap?”

“Of course they will. If you go to a big city, you’ll usually find there’s an officer of arms who’ll go around and check things out. And you’ll get people jealous if you have a crest that looks like a noble’s. You can count on someone tipping the officer off.”

Myuri's face scrunched up in response to society's inconvenient systems.

"Well, it's tough enough for me to run this stall, so owning a company big enough to have a coat of arms and not just a sign is a dream in a dream. And you always get to choose if you want to dream or not, so why not take one for reference?"

Despite how discouraged Myuri seemed in response to the stall keeper's sales pitch, she began her search for the amulet she was looking for.

Even after putting away such a huge portion of flounder bones and some bread on top of that, Myuri sat on the massive stone steps of the cathedral munching on a honey-dipped biscuit.

Though she had a new snack in hand, she did not seem very cheerful at all; she took a nibble of her biscuit and sighed, then took another nibble and sighed again. Though Col knew he should not be spoiling her, he could not help but buy her something sweet after seeing how despondent she was.

There were two reasons she was in this state.

One was coming face-to-face with the onerous social restrictions surrounding the use of heraldry.

The other reason was that in a stall that sold all different types of amulets, she was still unable to find what she was looking for.

"Even though they had eagles...There were so many eagles...", she muttered, staring blankly at the bottom of the steps. The amulet stall seemed to have every type of design imaginable—from deer, to turtles, to standard ones like lions, and even odder types, like rabbits and fish. She also found a good handful of crests featuring plants, a newer trend that depicted things like lilies, olives, and laurel trees.

After searching every nook and cranny, Myuri had finally asked, *Do you have any wolves?*

The stall keeper had looked at her in shock for a moment, then burst out laughing. This was the Kingdom of Winfiel, after all—the land known the world over for its wool. The order of knights that served the king directly were called the Knights of the Golden Sheep. Why would anyone have a crest featuring a

wolf, the sheep's mortal enemy?

Though such mysterious strength was valued back in the time of the ancient empire, wolves were mostly equated with attacking livestock and hurting people. And apparently, this also meant it was a symbol favored by mercenaries, who used their ferociousness as a selling point. Only a small portion of the oldest noble families, whose lineages could be traced directly back to the ancient empire, used wolf motifs at all.

On the other hand, though Myuri often referred to Sharon as a chicken and quarreled with her, Sharon's animal form, the eagle, was featured on a great deal of crests. When Myuri learned it was still a popular design even in modern times, she became even more depressed.

"It seems like crest designs go in and out of fashion," Col tried to say as harmlessly as he could. Myuri inhaled deeply and sighed.

Col smiled wryly at the sigh, and he continued.

"At least that doesn't apply to wolves on signs, yes?"

In the hot spring village of Nyohhira especially, it was often said that the most popular bathhouse that outshone all the other long-established houses was the one with a wolf on its sign.

For Myuri, however, that was hardly the point.

"But I don't want a sign...," she muttered in a hoarse voice. "Those crests had such a cool system..."

As the amulet stall keeper explained, coats of arms had a set format: a plant or animal represented the owner's origin, the creeds they lived by, and various ornaments that detailed their history.

Just as formal rituals possessed an indescribable, yet undeniable import, signs that were not so concerned with form clearly did not carry the same gravitas as a coat of arms.

"Plus, I didn't know you couldn't just use whatever you wanted."

Coats of arms symbolized who someone was and where they came from—there would be little point if anyone could use whatever crest they felt like.

Myuri sulked, taking it out on the biscuit as she bit into it.

Though she loved all adventure stories, the ones that got her most excited invariably featured knights.

It was only natural that she was so taken with real crests.

Children certainly get attached to all sorts of things, Col mused, noticing something dangling at his chest as he twisted around from his seat on the steps. It was the crest of the Church.

This was something that true believers would always wear. He clasped the crest in his hand and turned to look up at the building behind him.

The stone cathedral towered over them, and the same crest he held in his hands also hung from the eaves directly above the main entrance. When the faithful looked up at it and grasped their own crests, surely they felt a connection with God, renewing their faith.

Which meant—

“Brother?”

It was Myuri’s voice that brought him back to his senses.

“Are you okay?”

Col had a bad habit of losing himself in his own thoughts, and Myuri apparently regarded this behavior as somewhat frightening. She once described it as the same eerie feeling people get when they spot a cat staring at an empty corner of a room.

Col’s expression relaxed when he looked at Myuri, who was still a bit hunched over, and he reached out to her.

“You have honey on your face.”

As he wiped it off with his index finger, she closed one eye in annoyance.

“Let’s make a crest.”

“Huh?”

It was not a pure smile that he offered to the astonished Myuri.

“A crest. Do you not want one?”

The sheer joy she felt made the words catch in her throat, but then she suddenly paused.

“...Wh-why, all of a sudden?”

Col was the type to scold her for eating even one skewer of lamb—usually saying it was a waste of money, or that she was eating too much.

There were all sorts of complicated rules when it came to creating a crest, so what could he possibly ask for in exchange for this?

Col sensed her caution, smiled, and admitted to her, “I haven’t been able to reciprocate your feelings. Correct?”

“Uh...um... Huh?”

“At the end of the day, I still see you as my younger sister, though we are not related by blood, while you wish to be more than just my sister. Is that correct?”

Myuri suddenly grew anxious at him bringing up this topic so abruptly. She almost seemed on the brink of tears.

Perhaps she had imagined this might be the end of their journey together.

But conversely, that was a sign of how difficult she thought it would be to reconcile their positions.

Her feelings were sincere, to an extent that calling them a young child’s passing impulse would be terribly inconsiderate. There was no doubt that she had been in a lot of pain when they had decided to put the matter on hold for a time.

What she had kept hidden through the curtain of resignation was, without a doubt, the raw feelings laid out before him at this very moment.

“Coats of arms are protected by rules. Once a crest has been formally recognized, no one else may use the exact same pattern.”

When Col added to the stall keeper’s explanation, Myuri huddled into a smaller ball as she peered up at him with wide eyes.

“Permission to use a coat of arms is protected by something called privileges. For example, special permission to use a crest is usually only granted by nobles or city councils. That is why, if we make a crest just for ourselves, we will be the only ones in the world allowed to use it.”

When he said that, Myuri’s eyes snapped open.

People often described going completely still with the popular expression, “A witch sneezed.”

Myuri’s state perfectly captured this—she sat there completely frozen, like a statue.

“What do you think? I vowed to you that no matter what happens, I will always be there for you. I can’t guarantee that in the form of marriage, but I thought that perhaps a crest would be a good alternative. I do want to keep traveling with you, but for the moment we—”

Col was cut off by Myuri leaping toward him.

Just like a wolf pouncing with no warning, the next thing Col registered was that the sky was spinning and he had fallen down.

Though it may have been due to how touched she was that she clung to his neck and buried her face into his shoulder as though she was going to bite him, it may have also been because she was desperately trying her hardest to keep her ears and tail from sprouting.

When Col managed to sit back up, he noticed some odd stares coming from passing merchants, but it was not unusual to see two young people enjoying a romantic rendezvous in the sunny cathedral square.

And if it made Myuri that happy, then he did not mind becoming the world’s laughingstock.

Col embraced her small form in return and whispered, “It will be a coat of arms that only you and I can use. And then, even when you get married, you can take it with you as a dowry, in the form of a privilege.”

When he said that, she glared up at him with her damp red eyes.

“I’m not marrying anyone besides you.”

Her powerful stare told him this was the one thing she would never compromise on, and when she finally relaxed, she hung her head and rubbed her face with both sleeves.

When Myuri looked back up, she was already smiling.

“But that makes me happy, Brother. Thank you!”

Col returned the smile and hugged her briefly once more.

He idly wondered how intensely her tail would be wagging if it were out, but once they parted, she lifted her head like a waterfowl coming up for air.

“But how are we gonna make it?”

“Hmm?”

“Don’t we need a noble’s permission or something like that?”

Col was rather astonished at the question, because she had not said it as a joke. She was genuinely asking him.

It was absolute proof that she rarely ever paid attention to authority.

“What are you talking about? Is it not thanks to a certain someone that we get to stay in a lovely manor here in Rausbourne?”

“...Oh! Blondie!”

Hyland was genuine royalty.

If they asked her, she would almost certainly grant them permission to use one or two coats of arms.

Col figured as much, but he did not forget to pinch Myuri’s cheeks.

“She is not ‘Blondie’; her name is Heir Hyland.”

“E-ehh Haiwah...”

“Good grief.”

He had barely squeezed her with his fingers, but when he let go, she still made a show of rubbing her cheek in pain before forcefully hugging him again.

She sure is an active girl. He smiled in exasperation.

“Let’s return to the manor. You did say that Heir Hyland should be returning this evening, right?”

“Oh yeah! We’ve gotta pick what our crest will look like!”

“I doubt we need to decide right away.”

“C’mon, Brother, get up! We need to get back to the manor!” Myuri shot up and began tugging at Col’s clothing.

He was glad to see her as energetic as always and felt like he had finally managed to fulfill one of his responsibilities.

Before he allowed her to drag him down the stone steps, he turned back to look at the cathedral.

He gave his thanks to God and followed Myuri soon after.



*

Myuri lay on her stomach on the bed, kicking her feet as she doodled crests in a wax tablet. Her ears perked when she heard the carriage, and she leaped from the bed.

Though they had gotten much closer and casual as of late, Hyland appeared to still sense a bit of a wall between her and Myuri. Though she was delighted to have Myuri welcoming her back with a beaming smile the moment she stepped from her carriage, she was terribly bewildered by the surprise greeting.

Myuri even took the initiative to bring in Hyland's things; Hyland, too, moved to help for some reason, but her servants stopped her.

Col felt bad for her when he saw that happen, so when he finally explained, "She actually has something she wishes to ask of you," a look of understanding finally crossed the royal's face.

"Ahh...I see. I was wondering why that was happening." Hyland instead seemed relieved and smiled brightly. "Which must mean that is a child who helps because she wants something, which I've heard so much about. Is it not?"

Hyland glanced at Myuri as she busily carried trunks back and forth, and a gentle smile spread across her face. Col felt like he was about to disappear from the embarrassment.

"My father came to my house several times when I was a child."

"Hmm?"

Col turned to look at Hyland when she made the sudden remark, and she was gazing off into the distance.

"He would tell me there was nothing endearing about me. I was not a part of the head family, so I tried so hard to show how disciplined and upstanding I could be, but it seems the right tactic was to simply wheedle for his attention."

Col had a feeling that Myuri was not so much simple or honest as much as just plain rude. Hyland, however, watched Myuri as though she were comparing answers to an old test.

"I truly wanted to act like a spoiled child with him."

Though she was a royal, Hyland was an illegitimate child. In most cases, the mother and child of similar background would be given a paltry sum of money and be sent off to a remote village somewhere or erased outright if the country were facing questions about royal succession.

Though it was simply through Hyland's excellent capabilities that she had been allowed to inherit a branch household under the royal family despite being only a distant relative, Col could tell from the way she acted now that she had endured a great deal to get there.

"Ahh, my apologies. It's not a very interesting story."

"That is not true at all."

Col figured that whatever he said would end up sounding rude, and had settled on that response.

"I wonder what kind of favor she's going to ask for. I can't wait."

"Er, well..."

"No, you don't have to tell me now. Heh-heh. I always thought it was weird to see the great, terrible nobles fawning over their nieces and nephews, but now I get it. I understand." Hyland was gleefully impressed. "I also have some good news...Well, I'm not exactly sure if I can call it that, but I do have something to tell you. At dinner, of course."

Col felt nervous at the mention of news, but it did not sound like a bad thing.

"Understood."

Immediately after he gave his response, Hyland turned to look at Myuri. She seemed unable to help how excited she became as she watched the cunning girl pretend to be an obedient one.

Afterward, Col brought up the subject of the coats of arms at the dinner table.

Hyland did not seem reluctant at all; in fact, she was so surprised and happy that she was at a loss for words.

Since she knew about Myuri's romantic feelings toward Col, and Col's faith, she understood right away what the crest would mean for them. She even pointedly mentioned how much it was like being a witness at a wedding, to

which Myuri heartily agreed, and Col denied.

Either way, they were readily granted privileges to use a crest without a problem, and Hyland once again gently and earnestly proclaimed that she would take on their request.

There was no need for contracts or to shake hands like merchants.

Promises made by those of high standing were fulfilled on their word alone.

Myuri was visibly delighted and Hyland watched on with joy.

As a bonus, Hyland told them what it was like in the royal court. Since chances of war with the Church had risen after the events in Rausbourne, many there were insistent on being careful and conservative when it came to dealing with the Church.

It was common to hear comments that said the effects of changes throughout the world due to the appearance of the Twilight Cardinal were both a good and bad thing. On the plus side, the Church was facing increasing pressure from the masses, which had led them to start voluntarily reforming on the mainland, with some churches even divesting themselves of assets they had accumulated over time.

On the other hand, the nobles predicted that if they pushed much further with any drastic actions, the Church may respond with a forceful counter.

Therefore, rather than provoking the pope to set off a war, the nobles proposed to let the situation rest for a little while, much like one would with bread dough. If the Church were to change on its own, there was hope yet that the pope might reconsider his position.

And so, the court had elected for a temporary suspension of hostilities. Hyland, most notably, had apparently been ordered to keep the Twilight Cardinal quiet for the time being, mentioning him by name.

Hyland had seemed delighted since she, Col, and their companions had been acknowledged not as chaff, but a proper force to be reckoned with in the conflict. Col, too, felt himself trembling slightly from the excitement.

That said, he still had work to do on his translation, and Myuri had a coat of

arms to think about, so he was thankful for the break.

And so dinner went on; at one point Myuri even served Hyland her drink, and their laughs and smiles continued for hours.

The morning after a night of too much drink, Col awoke to the light of dawn filtering in through the gaps in the wooden window. It was time for morning mass, and while he would like to say that he naturally woke up due to his daily habits and faith, he actually emerged from his slumber thanks to the cathedral bells signaling the beginning of service that so many had been waiting for.

It was a bit chilly when he opened the window, but the solemn tolling of the bell coupled with the mist characteristic of coastal towns made for a pleasant combination. Cities most certainly felt lonely without a bell.

He knelt before the window, offered his prayers, and gave thanks for the coming of another day.

Once the echoes of the ringing bell had completely faded, he sighed as he stood.

“Where on earth could Myuri be this early?”

She had already been gone from the bed when he awoke.

He knew from the hairs her tail left behind that she had crawled into his blankets sometime during the night, but he did not know why she would be up so early; they were not traveling today.

On second thought, he reckoned that she must have gotten hungry and went to request breakfast, so he pulled out the chair and sat down at the writing desk. What he prepared were not tools for the scripture translation, but thin paper for writing letters and a quill. The whole series of chaotic events that had greeted them when they first set foot in Rausbourne meant that it had been quite a while since he last wrote a letter to Nyohhira, so it was about time he remedied that.

Especially since he had to report that Hyland had given her permission for them to create and use a personal coat of arms. In a way, being granted this privilege meant they now had a strong bond with the authority who issued it. What’s more, these were not common trading privileges—this was permission

to use their own crest.

Having those rights be granted with the possibility of war so near meant it would not be an exaggeration to say that connection gave them status as retainers of the royal family. Any young person who left their home village hoping to see the world could certainly return home with pride after an achievement like this.

Of course, Hyland had explained that they still needed to consider the purpose of their newly granted heraldry. That was something Col and Myuri needed to decide between themselves.

At the same time, however, it was also something he needed to inform Lawrence and Holo about.

“But...”

He paused, still holding the quill.

How should he inform the Nyohhira couple?

When Hyland spoke of the crest, she immediately took note of the implied meaning behind the decision.

So what would happen if he told Lawrence, Myuri’s father, about this?

In his previous letters, he had superficially stated that Myuri’s reasons for coming along were because she wanted to see the world, and that Myuri was helping him quite a lot.

Of course, Myuri’s mother, Holo, already knew how she felt, and she essentially sent her daughter on her way because it amused her, so it was not odd to assume that Holo had already told Lawrence of Myuri’s feelings. However, that still did not solve the rather distressing problem for Col as to whether or not he should inform Lawrence himself that Myuri harbored romantic feelings toward her traveling companion.

But if Col were to mention the crest without touching on the meaning behind their decision, that would also be a bit strange. Because then he would have to explain why he was bringing up a crest all of a sudden, which would be the same as brushing over the most important part of it, which felt insincere to him.

In fact, if Lawrence already knew about Myuri's romantic feelings, then leaving out an explanation would only invite unnecessary misconceptions.

As Col sat in front of the sheet of paper, quill in hand, thinking about this problem, he grew more and more uneasy.

A crest that only he and Myuri could use.

Though he had considered it a brilliant idea when he first thought of it, he now viewed it as incredibly profound, and even somewhat wanton.

Myuri would certainly treasure the crest.

And that only complicated his feelings on the matter.

"I suppose I cannot take it back now..."

Myuri would be furious, and Hyland would be disappointed.

As he sat there moaning that perhaps he was simply thinking too much, something startled him.

"Ahhh, I'm so hungry!"

The door was flung open and Myuri leaped into the room.

Col was so shocked his heart almost flew out of his mouth, and he dropped the quill.

"Hmm? What's wrong, Brother?"

Myuri stared at him, and the only answer Col could muster was, "Please don't open the door so suddenly..."

"C'mon, we need to go eat breakfast! I'm super hungry!"

She wore the clothes of a merchant, with bundles of paper in her hand and a quill tucked behind her ear.

"Don't tell me you have been out making purchases before dawn?"

"The harbor wakes up really early, Brother." She poked him with the tip of her quill. "The artisans take it easy till the sun rises, so I went and took care of the rest of the stuff for the monastery."

"Oh...Well done..."

The reason Col sounded so hesitant was because he did not know why she had to wake up so early to square everything away. He had fully expected her to sleep in until noon, especially since they would be staying in Rausbourne for a bit longer now.

As Col watched her loosen the sash around her waist—one she wore simply because it looked cool—and undo her roughly bound hair, Myuri spoke up.

“Let’s go out when we’re done with breakfast, Brother!”

“Go out? To where?”

She placed her hands on her hips and grinned.

“To the municipal office!”

All his questions—why they were going there, why she knew such a word in the first place—were answered over breakfast.

As the sun rose and the sea mist cleared, Col, Myuri, Hyland, and four of Hyland’s attendants headed over to the municipal office, which sat at the edge of the city plaza. Stalls targeting the morning churchgoers were already set up outside the cathedral. It seemed today was going to be another busy day.

“Then I will verify the procedures on my end. This is my first time granting crest privileges, after all.”

“Understood.”

“We’re meeting up at the Golden Fern for lunch, right?”

Hyland, who had just set off down the flagstone corridor, spun around at Myuri’s question and winked mischievously.

“C’mon, Brother.”

Myuri took Col by the hand and pulled him along in the opposite direction that Hyland had gone.

Though the place stood on the Rausbourne plaza along with the cathedral and the ever-popular lamb restaurant, the Golden Fern, the municipal office was a great, solemn space, isolated from the hustle and bustle outside. It had been built over two hundred years ago and anyone who stepped inside could feel the

weight of all that stone and time.

This was the home of the city's government, and one of the departments housed in the building managed coats of arms. Hyland had come here to confirm the procedures needed to apply for a new crest, and Myuri was present to decide on what sort of design they would use.

"Do you have any experience in handling books?"

They stood before a bronze door, which reminded Col somewhat of a church, and the arms officer, who managed the library, posed them a question. He seemed the epitome of a high-ranking bureaucrat, with his long beard stiffened with egg whites; Col saw Myuri squirming from her obvious desire to touch the beard.

"I have experience in transcribing the scripture."

"Ahh, God would be delighted to hear that. Very good, very good," the officer said as he opened the door with a key that was much oversized even in an adult's hand and invited them inside.

"Whoa..."

The instant they crossed over the threshold, Myuri murmured. Rather than holding her breath in admiration, her voice seemed tinged with a hint of fear.

Though it was not a terribly large space, books crammed the room from floor to ceiling, at a height which was about three or four times Col's own. The room was pentagonal in shape, and when he looked up to the ceiling, it almost felt like he had fallen into a well of books.

It seemed the books on the higher shelves could be reached by climbing a moveable ladder, but Col had no confidence he could manage to make it all the way to the top.

"When you are looking something up, please open the books on the table. Do not open any whilst holding them. There is a guide map on the wall over there. You may take a look at some rough crests on the tapestries over there."

"I see, thank you."

The officer nodded, satisfied, and said, "Take your time," before leaving the

room.

“I wonder how many crests there are in total,” Myuri said, finally snapping out of her daze.

“I have heard there are four, maybe five thousand in the kingdom alone. There are an incredible number of them.”

“Whoa, that’s so many.”

“And if you include families from the mainland, I have heard that the number rises well into the hundreds of thousands.”

A vague smile crossed Myuri’s face, as though she was unable to imagine a number so big.

“But most designs are essentially the same. The details that always change are the creeds, and the little ornaments in the corners. We can see the rough designs over here.”

The tapestry the officer had pointed out was affixed to an old brass board, placed in a darker corner of the room.

“The sheep is the biggest one.”

It was the legendary golden sheep—drawn in profile, with a grand physique featuring bulging shoulder muscles and massive horns.

This design served as the basis for the current royal family’s crest.

“You’ve met him before, right?”

Though there was no one else in the room with them, Myuri asked Col in a quiet voice.

“Yes. He was very firm in his convictions...Ah, yes, I suppose he was like Miss Ilenia.”

The sheep avatar Ilenia, whom they met at the previous port town, was Myuri’s first nonhuman friend.

Myuri seemed happy to hear that Ilenia and the golden sheep were similar, but Col did not forget to add an important detail.

“What makes them similar is their strength. This one looks like an old man.”

“Oh, right...”

Myuri must have thought she could have made another friend.

“Oh, a turtle. He said that one was the Euran Order of Knights, right?”

There were rows of crests they had spotted at the amulet stall outside the cathedral. Those of deer and rabbits were about the same size as the Euran Order, lined up in a way that made it seem like they were supporting the legs of the golden sheep, so perhaps they were crests of knightly orders that once existed in the kingdom.

“There are eagles.”

They were depicted on either side of the sheep, making them the second biggest animal on the tapestry, which brought a frown to Myuri’s face. It must have been a coat of arms for a well-known household.

“Everything with eagles...seems to be included from this shelf to that one.”

All the past visitors must have used their fingers to point and confirm the shelf guide that hung on the wall since it was so dark in the room—it was marked with finger oil, making it seem like an ancient map.

As Col followed the faded letters, he was shocked to see just how many crests used an eagle design.

“There may be even more eagles than the venerable sheep crests,” he mused, hoping to soothe Myuri, but that only made her even more dissatisfied. “Um... Oh, look, there are wolves.”

He saw *wolf* written near the top of the guide map.

The section for crests featuring wolves was in the left corner of a large floor-to-ceiling bookcase. The space they were allotted was about the same as if someone took half the height of the bookcase and then halved it again widthways.

“That’s not a lot at all!” Myuri whined, but in the end she slowly pulled one book from the shelf, cradling it as she took it back to the lectern. It was bound in leather hard enough to deflect a sword, and old enough that it was dried and cracked.

The fasteners attached to the edge of the pages were also falling apart, and the smell of mold wafted forth whenever she turned a page, signifying how many years it had been since someone had last touched the book.

“Wow...”

Yet she did not seem to mind the smell at all when she got to enjoy one of her favorite things.

Her eyes began to dance and her ears and tail immediately popped out.

Col, in a fluster, almost tried to get her to put them away, but then he stopped short.

The girl, inheritor of the blood of wolves and born as a nonhuman, sobbed when she had learned the secret of her lineage, lamenting that she was alone.

Yet there were people out there in the world who used wolves in their coats of arms, using the animal as the symbol of their house. Though the number was dwindling in recent times, there were still a good handful of people who proudly associated their family name with the wolf’s strength and mystique.

The valiant depictions of the wolves made that fact painfully clear to her.

It was rare to see another’s heart so clearly and genuinely moved.

Col could not bring himself to dampen her excitement.

Just how long did he spend watching her?

Myuri abruptly rubbed her eyes with her sleeve, then for some reason, smiled sheepishly.

“I wonder,” she said, “if any of these people met Mother’s friends, like Uncle Luward?”

Myuri was named after the friend of Holo the Wisewolf, as well as the mercenary company who still spoke of her friend’s name throughout the world today. Luward was the captain of the Myuri Mercenary Company, and if one traced Luward’s lineage, through father’s father’s father and on and on, the search would eventually turn up someone who did indeed battle alongside a massive wolf named Myuri.

It was that history that gave them the wolf emblem for their company.

“Perhaps. It is said that the many founders of various lineages often chose designs that resonated deeply with them when choosing a coat of arms. Much like your own father and Mister Luward, they may have worked together with a wolf to lay the foundations for a noble house in ancient times.”

This room contained the echoes of that bygone age in stories and records, relaying glimpses of a time when spirits roaming the forests were a common sight and various mythical creatures often interacted with humans.

Myuri must have realized that—she lifted her head and her breath caught in her throat.

This was none other than a home of great tales, where the sediment of time created an almost inconceivable number of layers.

“I wonder what kind of wolves they were,” Myuri said as she brushed her finger along the fur outline of the wolf on the crest. “Maybe it was even Mother.”

“That is not entirely impossible, which is the most incredible part.”

It was a dizzying, unbelievable story for most, but Myuri’s silver tail whipped back and forth beside Col, which made him smile—he was witnessing one of the world’s fantastic secrets.

“Oh, but”—as she flipped through the pages, her triangular wolf ears suddenly drooped—“these wolves might not be around anymore.”

“What?” Col asked, and Myuri slowly closed the large book, as though she was placing the lid back on her heart.

“The Moon-Hunting Bear.”

Col could not even make a noise in his realization.

That was the bear of myth who was said to have once fought many spirits, ending the age of forests and the night.

According to what Lawrence had found in his research on Holo’s friends from her hometown, they had perished in that battle.

And it was very likely that the Moon-Hunting Bear may have massacred a good number of the spirits that served as the basis for the crests in this library.

“Ugh, that brings back bad memories.”

As one who had inherited the blood of wolves, killing the Moon-Hunting Bear would be an act of retribution for Myuri. Holo the Wisewolf, who was alive during that age, did not seem to feel anything akin to resentment anymore, so perhaps there was the factor of youth at play here.

Col wished she would not be tempted into such a dark place, but he knew that was not territory he could step foot in.

He thought for a moment how he should respond, but in the end simply placed a gentle hand on her back.

Myuri looked up at him, and their eyes met.

Her large, red eyes seemed to glitter, even within the dimly lit library.

“Don’t make that face, Brother.” She flashed him a troubled smile then brought her face closer, squishing her cheek against his. “It’s not fair when you do that.”

“No, but—”

Something cut him off just as he was going to say something to the teasing Myuri.

She suddenly shivered, and her ears and tail vanished.

Not a second later, there came a knock at the door.

Myuri quickly stood from her chair, returned the book back to the shelf and retrieved a new one.

With no one else to do it, Col headed toward the door and opened it.

“Heir Hyland.”

“What’s the library like?”

Col stepped aside, and Hyland peeked into the room, sighing in fascination.

When Myuri turned in their direction, Hyland gave a small wave; Myuri

looked away in a huff before offering a small wave in return.

“Heh-heh. Oh, do you have a moment, Col?”

“Yes.”

Before following Hyland’s gesture to step outside, Col turned back toward Myuri.

She was still looking down at a book, as though telling him he was free to do what he liked. Once the subject of the Moon-Hunting Bear came up, their interactions always became somewhat strained. Neither of them could comfortably settle the matter—it embodied the differences that separated human from nonhuman.

On the other hand, Col could tell that she also did not like him having a conversation alone with Hyland, and if her tail had been out, it would have nervously been twitching side to side.

A wry smile spread across his face, and he left the library.

“What is it?”

“Well...”

Col stepped out into the quiet corridor, closed the door behind him, and asked if Hyland had anything to report only to receive an ambiguous response.

“I went ahead and asked about the procedures for the official use of coats of arms, and...” Hyland seemed to hesitate, so Col finished her thought for her.

“Granting privileges to use a crest must have been too much of a hassle. That is unfortunate, but I will make sure to tell Myuri.”

It came out so easily perhaps because he felt relief from being freed from the distress over whether he should tell Lawrence about it or not.

But Hyland’s head whipped up.

“Oh, no, that’s not a problem. That’s all fine.”

“Is...is that so? I do think it makes sense that we would not be able to use a crest of a wolf in a kingdom whose founding myth is based on a sheep...”

When Hyland heard him say that, she laughed, her shoulders relaxing.

“I doubt that would be grounds for rejection. It wouldn’t be good if you raised a banner with a skull crest, though.”

For a moment, Col thought about how happy Myuri would be to see such a design.

“That’s all right, then.”

Then what was causing Hyland to hesitate?

He looked to her, and she sighed, as he thought she would, before speaking in defeat.

“There is no problem when it comes to me granting use privileges for a coat of arms. I can guarantee the authority of whatever crest you like under my name. But I started to feel unsure when the arms officer started asking me about the items required for the crest.”

That was not what Col had been expecting. Hyland then suddenly took a few steps away from the library doors and lowered her voice.

“It’s the relationship between the users of the crest.”

“...What do you mean?”

“They don’t mind if you use similar crests that are only ever so slightly different, but...if it’s completely the same, then apparently those sharing the crest will need some sort of official relationship.”

Col could do nothing but nod along, but it was clear that he did not quite comprehend what she meant.

So Hyland explained, “Coats of arms have authority, right? Which means if the people using the same crest go through some sort of split, then only one of them will inherit the crest. Detailed rules on who would be given priority in a situation like that, especially when the question of succession comes into play, have long since been established and are directly based on the laws of the ancient empire.”

It would certainly sow chaos if a whole family using the same crest suddenly started fighting for some reason, and then the mutually estranged family members started using the same crest without permission.

“Which brings up the question of your relationship with the young lady,” she said, which immediately made Col aware as to why Hyland was so troubled.

Painfully aware.

“I have heard that you and Myuri are not true siblings; is that so?”

“Yes...I worked at her home, and I have been taking care of her since she was born.”

“Which means, in a strict sense, a young lady employer and her servant. But two people of such a relationship using the same crest is, well, how do I put this...”

So it seemed the apparent immorality was not just Col’s imagination.

On the surface, all it would bring to mind was the implication of an illicit love affair.

“To be honest, when I went to report on the matter to the bathhouse back in Nyohhira, part of it felt somehow immoral to me...I thought it had been a good idea, but I fear I may have been careless.”

“No, I think it’s a truly wonderful idea. It’s not romantic love, nor are you family, but you have a bond stronger than any I’ve known. Such things do exist, and such things should exist. Even I thought that a crest only the two of you can use in the whole wide world as a symbol of your bond was a beautiful thing.”

Col could sense the sincerity in her statement, which meant that it also shared a problem just as deep.

“We could use the master and apprentice format, like the more famous artisan families.”

That would be much more easily accepted.

“But you’re not master and apprentice, are you?”

“I suppose you could also say tutor and pupil...”

“‘Pupil’ is a weak relationship when it comes to inheriting the crest.”

It was a complicated problem, but when Col saw how earnestly Hyland was thinking for their sake, he could not help but smile.

When Hyland noticed him smiling, she looked at him curiously.

“My apologies, I just...”

“Just what?” she asked in return, and Col decided to answer honestly.

“My apologies. I was just so happy that you are being so serious about this.”

Hyland blinked several times before angrily stating, “Of course I am. This is a serious matter to you, too, is it not?”

Her disgruntled attitude surprised him.

“I could come up with false descriptions all day. But this is supposed to represent your relationship with her. Why would I insert lies and falsehoods into that?”

She spoke with the conviction of someone explaining the most obvious of facts, like describing how the sun rises in the east or the sea being salty.

When Hyland noticed Col’s reaction, she cooled herself.

Guilty and embarrassed, she said, “I am sorry. It’s just such a lovely tale that I almost got lost in it.”

This confirmed once again to Col that he had met a wonderful person.

“I wish I could show the joy I felt in such a concrete manner.”

“Stop. That’s not it.” Hyland turned away and sighed. “I am embarrassingly moved by familial bonds because of the circumstances surrounding my own birth.”



She was, after all, the king's illegitimate child.

Col fell silent, unable to say a word when he saw how tensely Hyland's shoulders were drawn up in self-deprecation.

"Well, I suppose...I'm just letting you know I'm ready. If you can't settle on a fitting relationship, then I can make it something safe, like master and apprentice," Hyland said, using her hand to lightly fan her face, and looked out to the plaza beyond the barred window. "Good grief, I knew I would get hot in here, though. I'm going outside to catch some air. I suppose I'll get us a seat at the Golden Fern, too."

Col could not stop her—he simply bowed his head and saw her off.

Still, the main reason he could not come up with anything to say was because his head was occupied by something else entirely.

What was his relationship with Myuri?

They were not siblings, not lovers, nor were they master and apprentice.

He listed them one after another, but none quite hit the mark.

As he counted them off his fingers, that was when he first understood just how ambiguous and uncertain their relationship was.

They spent all their time together. Myuri had even put her life on the line for him, and he, too, fully planned to make good on his promise to be there for her for as long as he lived. Yet there was no term or name that properly described their relationship.

When he realized that, it felt like time had stopped in the empty stone corridor. It felt as if the passageway extended forever before and behind him, and though he held a key in his hand, it opened none of the doors.

That was when it dawned on him that this was what Myuri's unease felt like.

A place for her to rest, a place of peace—though she had the key that should lead there, she had no idea which door it would open. All she had to rely on was a promise she had once heard.

He now knew why Myuri said she liked him as a man, yet could not stop

calling him “Brother”—that was one of the very few remaining threads she could tangibly grasp.

When they were sitting before the cathedral, he had suggested a crest in an almost casual manner. All he had been cognizant of was that Myuri would certainly rejoice—a little gift to soothe the guilt he felt. But it had carried unbelievable significance.

To Myuri, the crest was surely the sign on the door.

One she had finally spotted after wandering the same cold, stone halls for ages.

Col’s duty was to scatter petals along the path to the door.

“But...”

What was he to do?

As he stood alone in the quiet, stone corridor, he wished he could lose himself in the scripture.

CHAPTER TWO



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Col had lost his nerve after talking to Hyland about relationships. He loitered in the corridor, finding it hard to return to the library. The next thing he knew, he found himself heading back out to the plaza and purchasing some raisins that Myuri might like. It was only when the church bell rang, announcing noon mass, that he finally snapped out of it.

He and Hyland had managed to talk about the relationship part of the coat of arms procedure without alerting Myuri to it. But just as Hyland said, what they were doing was a wonderful thing. If possible, he wanted to avoid introducing lies or misconceptions into the process. Yet he had no idea how Myuri might react when he told her, and as shameful as it was, he had to muster all the willpower he had in order to return to the library.

He pushed open the large, church-like doors, almost as if they were physical manifestation of his heavy feelings, before stepping back inside.

Myuri sat at the reading desk, engrossed in a book.

He called out to her to explain, "I need to tell you something..."

He firmly asserted that they would absolutely be making a crest, for her, to make sure he did not shock her. She kept the book of crests open as she listened. He used all the strength he could muster, knowing that now was the time he needed to stay composed, but Myuri's response came with a sigh, the reappearance of her wolf ears and tail, and an exasperated tone: "You're telling me this *now*?"

She shrugged her shoulders, closed her book, and stood.

"I worried a lot about this in the past, sure."

Col did all he could to keep himself from smiling at the way she said *in the past*. Myuri extended her hand toward him, deftly snatched the bag of raisins from him, and clung to his arm while she was at it.

“But you said it yourself: unlike God, you’re right here. When I touch you, you’re surprisingly muscular, and you definitely smell weird and sour like ink.”

“I smell?”

Col panicked. He thought he’d been careful. Myuri beamed in triumph.

“Heh-heh, that is the Twilight Cardinal I know, that nobody else knows. I could write up a notice and put it on the street corner, and no one would be able to tell.”

“...”

Col found himself at a loss for words, not in reaction to being laughed at, but to Myuri’s wit.

What she was saying was that what was written on paper did not always contain the whole truth.

“Our relationship, you said? It doesn’t matter what it is.”

Myuri, with her hands behind her back, spun around and fell backward into his arms.

“We’ll have a crest that only you and I can use. That’s enough for me.”

She looked up at him over her shoulder, then spun around and clung to him.

Her wolf tail flicked back and forth.

Whenever he thought of her as an adult she was more like a child, and whenever he thought of her as a child, she was much more of an adult than he was.

The way Col wrapped his arms around her was almost like a criminal having his hands bound.

“But if we do go with master and pupil, I’d be the master, right?” Myuri asked, looking up at him from within his arms. It was a shame that he was unable to deny her straight away.

“I am very glad you said that.”

In his relief, he embraced Myuri in return, who clung to him like a badly trained puppy. When he brushed her ribs on her back, she squirmed in

ticklishness.

“But I hope to continue searching for the right name to call what we have a bit more.”

“Your wife.”

“No.”

Though he turned her down right away, Myuri seemed to be smiling in glee instead.

“Well, you study a whole lot, so maybe you’ll find something fitting. And when that happens”—Myuri stepped out of his arms and looked at him straight on—“maybe I’ll call you something besides ‘Brother.’”

She seemed delighted, yet somewhat sad.

But just as she had said before, Myuri herself was still there.

“I look forward to it.”

“Well then,” she began after baring her teeth to him. “I have some research to do.”

“Of course, take your time. We still have lots of time.”

After giving his reply, he found that something she said caught his attention.

And when she returned to the desk and opened the book again, he saw it was not a collection of wolf crests.

“Research? Are you not looking for designs?”

He peered over her shoulder to look at the book, where he found what looked to be the tale of the founding of the kingdom written in grand, stately writing, accompanied by pictures of the golden sheep and armed men.

“I could look at designs forever, but it seems like some of the crests from the more famous lineages have traces of the founding story in them,” Myuri replied, as though she immediately grasped that he had questions about why she was reading a picture book. “Even in designs with the same animal, they’re looking in different directions or carrying things in their mouths or on their backs. Sometimes they have two heads, and I even saw a crest with a wolf

drawn with twin babies. It all apparently has meaning to it.”

One grand story was always contained in a single crest. They served as guideposts for the people of future generations, when they were unsure what kind of people they were meant to be.

“Does this mean you were looking up the meanings because you also want to include such a story in your crest?”

“Yeah. And I want to hear the story from the source, too.”

“That is—”

Not possible, he was about to say, but he paused.

It was not impossible when it came to the golden sheep, at the very least.

Myuri sensed that he had realized that.

“You’ve got nothing to do, right?”

“Well, I would not say *nothing*...”

He had hoped to complete more of the translation he was working on, but he had made good progress on the main parts already.

And since he had spent a whole week cooped up in the room, Myuri was itching to have God return Col to her.

As he considered things carefully about that, Myuri said quietly, “I want to hear this story from someone who actually knows about it, then pick my crest.”

Following in the footsteps of one’s predecessors was a good thing.

But Myuri had come up with a rather ominous idea.

“And I’m thinking it’s that sheep’s fault that there are no wolf crests in this country.”

Though Col sensed a brilliant youthful energy coming from her dauntless smile, he sighed.

“Miss Ilenia was a sturdy sheep, but Miss Holo was overwhelmed by Mister Huskins, too, you know.”

“What?! Mother was?!”

Holo the Wisewolf was the most powerful being in the world to Myuri. And when Myuri learned that Holo had been treated like a child by another, her shock was impressive.

“But, hmm. I suppose I know little about the story of the kingdom before it was founded like we heard at the amulet stall, so I am curious.”

“Right? I bet that sheep knows a whole lot about the knight orders that are gone now!”

Col wondered if that was not her true objective, but they had been facing danger after danger ever since they left Nyohhira. It was not a terrible thing to enjoy some peace every once in a while, and it would certainly help Myuri broaden her horizons.

“Very well, let’s see what we can find out.”

“Yeah!”

As Myuri replied, there came the sound of a bell from outside the door.

“Let’s have a meal before that, then. Heir Hyland said she would save us a seat at the Golden Fern.”

“I got sooo hungry looking at pictures of sheep!”

They returned the books to their shelves, told the officer they would be leaving, and exited the municipal office.

The early spring sun almost made the people milling in the plaza glow.

Huskins, the golden sheep, lived in a place called the Brondel Abbey, one of the greatest abbeys within the kingdom. Upon checking the map, they confirmed that it was not terribly far, but not exactly close either, and would take four or five days to reach on horseback.

Hyland seemed curious as to why they wanted to go there, so Col explained that the old shepherd who lived in the great abbey of Brondel was an acquaintance from a previous journey, and he possessed great wisdom.

There was a mystique to shepherds since they rarely ever interacted with townsfolk, to the point where there were often rumors that they practiced magic as they got older. Hyland must have thought the same thing—that this

man must be a peerless scholar.

And considering how Brondel Abbey boasted a history more ancient than the kingdom itself, had mighty riches, and was well-known for being high-handed, Col and Myuri had a letter written for them so that they would not be turned away at the gates. But there was still no point if Huskins rejected an audience with them, even if the abbey gates did open for them, so Myuri had one of Sharon's bird friends take a letter there first.

As they set their itinerary, Hyland expressed her wishes to offer them protection, but Myuri refused, stating it would get in the way of their alone time. As a compromise, Hyland would have an outrider arrive at the towns along their journey ahead of time to hedge against any unforeseen troubles. This gave Col relief, as this would help keep Myuri in check on their journey, since she was prone to changing the path as though she was chasing a butterfly.

It took roughly three days of waiting to get the horses prepared, information on the road conditions, and the response from Huskins. In the meanwhile, Myuri spent all her time in the coats of arms library. When she crawled into Col's bed at night, she smelled of the old leather binding the books and the acidic scent of ink—and that must have been what he himself smelled like, Col thought.

On the day of their departure, Hyland, who would remain in the city, saw them off as Col and Myuri set off from Rausbourne.

Some of the merchants who frequented the manor Hyland was renting were forming a caravan to travel to one of the towns along the way, so the two joined their procession. It was a leisurely caravan ride; at noon they had a hot meal over a fire, and by nightfall, they reached their first destination just as planned.

They joined with the guards that Hyland had arranged for them, and it seemed things were going in an auspicious direction.

"We'd only ever traveled by boat before, so I was kind of steeling myself for this, but traveling is easy," Myuri said, considering how comfortable their journey was. And the following day, one of the merchants from the caravan mentioned they were still needing to travel in the same direction as the duo, so

they decided to go together. The first day on a cart was not a magnificent affair, but they were allowed onto the cart bed, which was stacked full of wools. It brought great joy to Myuri, who imagined the travels her parents had told her so much about.

The second day also ended without incident, and the first half of their journey passed by in a flash. And it was from this point on that Col and Myuri's journey alone would begin. Their escort had gone ahead to check the road as their forerunner, and most importantly, Myuri was a wolf girl. It was a relief not to have to worry about bandits or anything.

While Col doubted anything would happen, when they arrived in town at sunset, he spotted some snow still hiding in the shade of the buildings.

"Things might be a bit rough starting tomorrow."

However, Myuri seemed to think it would simply be a continuation of trip's first leg and woke up early and in high spirits, desperate to get on the road.

It did not take very long for her to fall quiet.

"My butt hurts..."

One needed to, as it was known colloquially, settle in the saddle in order to ride a horse for extended periods of time. Hyland, who was used to riding horseback, had been considerate enough to prepare wool padding in their things, but it was still too painful for Myuri.

But even though she had the option to walk, the road was muddy, as it was the time of spring when the snow was still melting. She loved to look fashionable, and she seemed resistant to getting her clothes dirty, even though she was only borrowing them from Hyland. In the end, she remained on the horse as she moaned about it, and when their lunch was done and they were ready to set off again, she mounted the horse practically in tears.

If their escort, who had been waiting for them at the third rest town, had not felt sorry for her and procured a cart for riding in, they may have had to pause for several days. It was a bittersweet experience for Myuri, who had only ever experienced overland travel in the form of story.

That said, the journey itself was going well, and even though they were going

a bit slow because of the quagmire caused by the melting snow, there were inns along the way so they did not have to sleep outside.

It was noon of the fourth day, just as Col was thinking about how their trip would soon conclude without incident.

“What is it?”

The cart had come to a sudden halt. They were in the middle of an empty, grassy field, and all that surrounded them were gentle hills. Col wondered if a wheel had gotten caught in the mud, and so he readied some clothes he bought just the other day that he did not mind getting dirty so that he might help.

Their escort, who sat in the driver’s perch, then spoke.

“I fear this may be an ambush.”

It was terribly ominous.

“We’ll take the cart back a bit, and then I will go check on my own.”

Myuri, who had been laying in the cart bed because her rear was sore, drawing all sorts of crest designs on her wooden board, sat up straight and exchanged glances with Col.

“Ambushed? Like, by mountain bandits?”

“More likely highway robbers, but yes,” Col replied. “But...”

He stared down the road from the cart bed, but he could not see anyone. All around them were gentle hills, and it was hard to imagine any feasible hiding spaces. Myuri’s eyesight was not particularly good, so she may not have been able to see it, but she sniffed and caught whiff of something in the damp, early spring air.

“It smells kind of...sad.”

Col looked at her, disappointed with such a vague report, but Myuri pursed her lips.

“I can smell anger right away, but it really does smell like that.”

He had a feeling that Holo had said the same thing once before as well.

“But the ambush?”

The escort stepped down from the driver's perch and took the horses by the bit to turn them around. Yet Col still lowered his voice to ask the question, and Myuri shrugged.

"I think it's just one person, but I wouldn't have known someone was ahead if he didn't say anything. He's amazing."

The escort seemed rather young still, but Hyland had truly commissioned a skilled guard for them.

Then, after moving the cart back to a safe place, the escort took his bow in hand and slunk off into the shade of the hills.

He vanished for a while into the gently rolling grass.

It was not long before he returned carrying a boy on his shoulders.

Col's first impression of the boy slung over the escort's shoulder was of a handkerchief that had been inadvertently dropped as one traversed about a muddy town, then retrieved the following day.

"Is he injured? Conscious?"

Col hurriedly jumped from the cart bed and rushed to the escort.

The escort laid the boy down on a nearby grassy spot.

"He's fine. He only planted himself on the ground out of hunger. Isn't that right?" he asked, and the boy's eyes revealed themselves, peering out from his muddied face as he nodded. It was hard to tell due to all the grime, but upon closer inspection, one could see that his close-cropped hair was blond, like Hyland's, and his eyes were a gorgeous pale blue. His orderly good looks were that of a noble.

A hungry boy of noble blood covered in mud meant that he had fallen face-first, likely from light-headedness.

"I was on my toes since there are groups out there who will lay traps like this to ensnare good-natured travelers, but..."

Col somewhat understood why the escort sounded so shocked: It was what the boy was wearing.

He wore one thin outer layer, and his boots were made of soft leather, not designed to withstand the mud at all. His rucksack was small to begin with, but it lay flat, as though all of his rations had already been eaten.

Yet the sword at his side was oddly rustic. On top of that, due to how he was sprawled out, Col could see he was even wearing mail underneath his peeled-back clothes. Not only was that heavy, but it would not keep anyone warm on the chilly, early spring roads, making it essentially useless for ordinary travel.

The collapsed boy wore an outfit that brought more questions than answers.

“I would have pretended not to see him if he was simply a street urchin, however.”

Hyland had asked this escort to make sure their travels went safely.

Such harsh decisions were part of his job, but he had instead brought this boy back to them.

And that meant there was some sort of reason behind it.

“The great abbey of Brondel is just down this road, yes? Might he perhaps be one of theirs?”

If he was a guard stationed at the abbey, then Col could understand why he was armed. But that did not explain why his clothes suggested he was clearly not used to traveling, or how much of a fool he was to collapse from hunger.

“No. I was surprised, too, but apparently he’s training to be a knight.”

“What?”

The one who spoke was Myuri, watching the situation from afar in the cart bed. She hurriedly went to hop out of the cart, hesitated at the sight of the muddied road, changed her shoes to the cheap ones she bought in the previous town, and then cautiously stepped off.

When the boy realized there was a girl present, he gritted his teeth and sat up.

A small smile crossed the escort’s face at the sight. Myuri came over with food and water and handed it to the boy.

“Shouldn’t we start a fire?”

And with that one suggestion, they decided to look after the boy.

“I shall take care of that,” the escort said, then looked to the boy, who held the waterskin and half-stale bread in his hands. “Hey, kid, if you wanna come with us, then you better tell these good people what your deal is.”

The escort made it clear who among the three of them had the right to make the decisions in the group.

The boy looked at the escort with wide, meek eyes before slowly giving a big nod.

And despite how much he must have wanted the food and water in that moment, he bravely straightened his back, placed the waterskin and bread on his knees, and spoke.

“My name is Carl Rhodes.”

His voice was dry; his lips were cracked.

Yet despite that, there was a nobility about him that remained, and it did not seem that was a passing impression, either.

“I am a trainee in the Knights of Saint Kruza.”

Col now understood why he had such a rustic sword, such out-of-place mail, and why the escort decided to save him.

What he did not know was why the boy was here.

“The Knights of Saint Kruza!” Myuri yelled in excitement. “Those’re the knights that fight on Kruza Island, far in the southern seas, right?! Golden gauntlets, silver armor, a billowing red cape are their trademark! The Knights of Saint Kruza are the strongest in the world!”



All she ever listened to were stories like that back in the Nyohhira bathhouse.

Not only that, but the Knights of Saint Kruza were one of the most famous among countless other orders. It was a given that she would be excited about this revelation, but it only made Col more wary.

“I’m still only a trainee, so I still have a long way to go before I get to wear any of that equipment...”

Rhodes seemed a bit embarrassed, but Col could see a glimpse of pride shining through. And though he was just a trainee, Col had heard that only those of noble standing could join an order of knights with the hopes of becoming a knight themselves one day.

The boy was a child from a great family after all.

“But...why is a trainee from the Knights of Saint Kruza in a place like this?”

This particular order was well-known for being at the right hand of the pope. They were based on an island in the sea to the south, and their creed was to destroy all heretics and enemies of the faith. In essence, Winfiel Kingdom as it was now should be one of their hated enemies.

However, they positioned themselves as the earthly agents for carrying out divine punishment. If they were truly invading the kingdom, then something much larger should be taking place, not something so farcical as a single trainee wandering around and collapsing by the side of the road.

That held true even if he had been sent here as a scout before any fighting broke out.

It was hard to imagine that a group of skilled warriors would send him out with such meager equipment.

“Well, uh...,” Rhodes faltered.

“C’mon, Brother. Even if a knight fell into the hands of the enemy, he wouldn’t talk that easily.”

There was a tone of pride in Myuri’s voice for some reason. Col doubted that was the case, considering he knew the order’s standing, but Rhodes, rather, seemed relieved at Myuri’s naïveté.

“I know you have helped me a great deal here, so I feel terrible that I’m unable to tell you the whole story. But I was on my way to deliver a letter to the great abbey of Brondel at the end of the road here, on the orders of the knights.”

“Really? We’re going there, too!”

Rhodes offered a calm, mature smile, one that suited someone older than he looked, in response to Myuri’s attitude.

“Are you all on a pilgrimage?”

The boy must certainly be fervent in his faith, considering he was a child from a good family and a trainee of an order of knights so closely tied to the pope. Col had a hard time finding his words when the boy asked the question so easily.

“It’s a bit complicated,” Myuri took over for him. “But my brother and I—well, I guess I call him a brother, but he just worked for my father; he’s not my real brother—” Rhodes was a bit shocked at the rapid explanation, though he still nodded along. “Anyway, we’re on a journey to see the whole wide world, and we were researching coats of arms in a city called Rausbourne.”

“Aha, for a branch family, I suppose?”

Rhodes was of such a status that talk of heraldry seemed commonplace to him. His tone suggested he did not question Myuri’s explanation at all.

“Yeah. Something like that. But then we heard there used to be so many knight orders in the kingdom a long time ago when we were doing our research, so we decided to talk to someone who knows all about that stuff.”

“There is a man who works here at the Brondel Abbey as a shepherd, and he knows many stories of old,” Col added.

Rhodes looked back and forth between the pair and nodded.

“I see. Then I think our meeting must be divine providence. I see you are believers in proper faith for being in this country.”

So the comfort that Col had briefly felt was not of his imagination.

Rhodes seemed to have gotten his energy back by talking to others; a

fearlessness returned to his face and he said, “If you’ve just come from Rausbourne, then that must mean you’ve heard tell of the infamous Twilight Cardinal.”

Col was no match for Myuri when it came to dealing with such sudden turns of event.

“Of course. Just rumors, though. But aren’t you hungry? We can talk later.”

Rhodes was about to say something, but his stomach interrupted him with a growl.

Any boy of age would go red having his stomach rumble so loudly before a girl, not just a knight-in-training.

Myuri chuckled and said, “There’s seconds if you want them.”

Rhodes was thoroughly embarrassed, but he eventually bit into his bread; there was nothing that could stop a growing boy’s appetite.

In the end, he put away three whole pieces of bread accompanied by salted meat roasted over the fire kindled by the escort.

“Do you pray three times a day? What, you can’t talk during meals? Do you really see if there’s poison in your food with silver rings? Have you ever been recognized?”

Myuri took the opportunity to throw question after question at Rhodes, who was much calmer after a proper meal. Rather than listening to a performer tell stories, she had a real knight-in-training right in front of her.

Col certainly felt like she could not help but want to verify all the stories she had heard in the past, but he also suspected it was quite deliberate.

Before they ate, Rhodes had called the Twilight Cardinal “infamous.”

The young man that acted as their escort called Col over to the cart, which was several paces away, and began to talk to him while pretending to put their things away.

“Considering my status, I was unable to leave the boy as he was, so I brought him over.”

Though the expression on the escort's face was flat, Col could sense that he would be willing to tie the boy up and leave him somewhere if he was given the order.

"No, it's all right, it would be wrong to abandon a person in need. And luckily, it seems he has not discovered who I am."

As Myuri chatted with Rhodes, she casually identified herself as Ilenia.

"That I agree with, but what bothers me is why someone from that knight order has found his way into our kingdom."

Col had been wondering the same.

"Considering his dress, he does not seem very prepared at all, does he."

"It's almost like he was sent from their base in the south straight here with nothing but the clothes on his back. It's hard to imagine he's come to wage war."

Which meant there were not many other possibilities that came to mind.

"A deserter?"

"He showed me the letter with the order's seal on it to prove he could be trusted. He would hide who he was if he were a deserter. Cruel work as the lowliest servant would be waiting for him if he were caught in that case."

He was not wrong.

"But I do have one theory. It's a little involved, so let's leave it until after we deliver him to the abbey."

As the escort finished talking, he placed the rest of the firewood and other things he used to make the fire back in the cart at roughly the same time. Rhodes might suspect something if they spoke for too long.

But perhaps they did not need that much caution.

"Brother?" Myuri rushed over, troubled. "He fell asleep. I guess he felt safe once he was warm and full."

"..."

When Col saw Rhodes fast asleep by the fire, he and the escort unconsciously

exchanged glances. It was hard to imagine he was either a warrior who had come to start a long-awaited war, or a scout who had been sent in preparation for imminent war.

What Col thought of when he looked at Rhodes was himself.

He had left home in a flurry without a destination and in hopes of becoming a theologian, but soon found himself at the end of his rope and essentially living a beggar's life. And when he ended up in deep trouble, Lawrence and Holo, who happened to be passing by, had saved him. That was the beginning of a long story, which eventually reached Myuri today.

And Myuri, of course, had heard the story from her mother.

"Mother told me you used to be like that, Brother."

"I could eat three whole loaves, too," Col replied, and she blinked in glee. "Is it far to the abbey?" He turned his question to the escort this time, who shrugged slightly.

"We will be a little late, but we will arrive tonight, I believe."

"Then let us be off. I would not want to make a tired child sleep outside like this."

The escort nodded wordlessly, put out the fire, then lifted Rhodes as he slept like a log into the cart bed.

It was not a gentle treatment, but Rhodes did not wake up.

And the pained expression on his face was not because he was ill, but perhaps because he was having a nightmare.

"O God..."

They heard him mutter that several times.

Myuri used a cloth dipped in water she had boiled to wipe his face.

Not minding that her clothes might get dirty, she placed his head on her lap and stroked his hair.

Rhodes even shed some tears as he slept.

He looked to be much too vulnerable, much too weak for the most prideful,

famous, and powerful order of knights in the world.

The moment Rhodes awoke, he shot up from the cart with something akin to a cry.

“Wh—, ah, wh—”

He patted himself all over, perhaps checking to see if anything had been stolen, but when Col saw him touching his left hip, he realized he was searching for his sword.

“Your sword is here. And your letter is in your breast pocket,” said the escort, gesturing. He had taken Rhodes’s sword, just in case.

When he mentioned the letter, Rhodes seemed to finally realize that he had fallen asleep.

He looked at the sky because it was now pitch-black. The campfire burned a bright red with a pot boiling over it.

“Oh, uh...”

“My apologies. We had in fact hoped to reach the abbey while you were sleeping.”

When Col said that, the escort looked down. They had planned to arrive by nightfall, but the road was in much worse condition than they had expected and one of the cart wheels had gotten stuck, which forced them to a halt.

In terms of distance, the abbey was a stone’s throw away. It was not too cold, though, so they decided to stay the night outside instead of forcing themselves forward with the possibility of getting lost. Col, of course, had said it was not the fault of the escort, but the man still felt guilty about it.

“I—I see...I’m sorry. My self-control failed me.”

Rhodes sat down, and Myuri handed him a drink. The concoction of goat’s milk—which they had bought in one of the towns along the way—mixed with honey and wine was one Col had prepared for her, but it was probably well-suited for the boy, who still had the face of a child.

And Myuri then sat by his side.

She must have felt bad about leaving him by himself there.

“You were having terrible nightmares as you slept,” Col said.

His comment was not only out of concern for the boy; he was also probing for answers.

Rhodes immediately understood both sides to the statement; he dropped his gaze and remained silent.

“And the way you are dressed is not very well-suited to travel in this region, either. If you are so willing...we can try to help you.”

Myuri took large scoops of lamb and onions from the pot and held a bowl out to Rhodes as he kept his head lowered. When he looked up, he smiled without a word. The boy’s face went red, noticeable even in the light of the fire, and he took the bowl from her.

As Col watched, he looked like a child of a good household that one might find anywhere.

But even though he could hardly call himself an expert on worldly affairs, Col could tell that he was still in a unique position.

And their escort had told him of rumors about the knight order along the way.

“You came to ask for relief from the Brondel Abbey. Is that correct?”

When Col posed his question, Rhodes trembled, almost spilling the contents of his bowl, which he held on his knee.

“H-how did you...? Did you read my—”

“We did not read your letter. What I know of the order’s situation and...your state, naturally led me to that conclusion.”

That was what the escort had said, at least.

“Don’t interrogate him like that, Brother,” Myuri interjected. “You don’t have to answer. They’re just being mean.”

She smoothly took Rhodes’s side.

Earlier, the escort had coolly deduced that he might open up easier if Myuri built a rapport with him, which was what led them to this strategy, but Col had

a feeling that her support was not entirely insincere. Rhodes was a part of a legendary order of knights she so deeply admired, after all.

“No...They aren’t mean,” Rhodes said—just as the escort had assessed—and placed his bowl down. “You have helped me a great deal. You carried me as I slept, and you even fed me...I can tell you come from a merchant household. You must be wondering what someone like me is up to.” Though he was not much older than Myuri, he spoke courteously. “And I am sure it will come to light sooner or later. So...” He looked at Myuri, who sat beside him. “There’s no need for that now. I’ll be all right. I don’t want you to spoil your beautiful looks with that frown,” he said, smiling to ease her mind. Though she was used to being called *adorable*, this may have been the first time anyone ever called her *beautiful*. It was not often anyone got to see her so shocked and bashful.

Though just a trainee, a knight was supposed to be virtuous enough to help the weak and drive away evil.

Rhodes seemed to be a paragon of those who aspired to knighthood.

“If there is something you wish to know, please ask. It’s my thanks for your offering me shelter and a meal. If it’s something I know, then I will tell you,” Rhodes said with a fortitude they never would have imagined he possessed when they first spotted him collapsed by the roadside.

The escort nodded silently, took the boy’s sword he had been keeping in his care, then tossed it to him over the fire.

“The sword wants to stay with the strong.”

Rhodes, reflexively catching the sword, realized that the escort had acknowledged him and bowed his head sincerely in response.

“Well, if I may ask—” Col cleared his throat and repeated what the escort had told him. “I have heard that the Knights of Saint Kruza—no, your unit within the Knights of Saint Kruza, to be more precise—has been struggling with poverty. Is that rumor true?”

The Knights of Saint Kruza were an organization that gathered under the name of the pope and fought in the name of faith. Just as churches were scattered unevenly across many countries, an order of knights was formed by

gathering the best of the best from all over the world.

When the war against the pagans was at its peak, the number of a country's knights who belonged to the Knights of Saint Kruza was interpreted as that country's religious standing. And so kings and feudal lords universally sent their fiercest soldiers and competed to collect donations.

It was because of those circumstances that the inner workings of the order were not monolithic; there were many factions separated by country who all competed with one another to demonstrate that they were the true vessel of God's will, and in the central base even access to daily essentials depended on position.

Myuri loved stories about knights, and she seemed to already think that was common knowledge, but that led Col to one conclusion.

The Kingdom of Winfiel, of course, normally offered enough donations to have their own company in the Knights of Saint Kruza, but the kingdom was currently directly opposed to the pope.

From the kingdom's perspective, sending donations to the Knights of Saint Kruza in order to keep their band of knights supplied was essentially the same as showing grace and mercy to the enemy. And on the other side, from the pope's perspective, he had a military force that was funded by a hostile country right at his side, both literally and figuratively.

As a result, with donations coming from the kingdom halted, the Winfiel Kingdom's company within the Knights of Saint Kruza had no one backing them. And to make matters worse, a strange character called the Twilight Cardinal had appeared, undermining the pope's interests. Since that particular unit within the order was comprised of people from the Winfiel Kingdom, their fellow knights doubted the authenticity of their faith.

The escort had told Col that word of this was spreading among the merchants who plied the sea shipping routes.

And so Rhodes responded, "...It is said that starvation is due to poor faith."

While he likely could not respond outright that they were in poverty due to his order's honor, Col still understood the actual circumstances.

“Then what about the rumor you will be returning to the kingdom?”

Rhodes thought for a moment before speaking.

“We are in a difficult position, but I could say the same for the whole Church and the clergymen in this country as well. That is why”—Rhodes brought his hand to his chest to make sure the letter was still there, then continued—“we have come to propose solidarity.”

He’s a smart one, Col thought.

If they were unable to stay at the order’s base, then they had no choice but to return to the kingdom.

However, if they were to surrender to the king that opposed the Church, then their reason for being as knights of the faith would come into question. They must have come up with the idea of being incorporated into the kingdom’s church as a last resort.

With what limited money they had, they sent boys like Rhodes out first so that they could explore their options in way that would not disturb the kingdom.

“You said earlier that we would learn about this all sooner or later,” Col said.

Rhodes nodded.

“A ship with our commander on board should have departed Kruza Island not long after us in the advance units. I believe they’ll be arriving at a port somewhere in the kingdom in the near future. The conditions on the island were...growing worse every day, you see.”

In other words, friendship and camaraderie were reserved only for those considered solidly on the same side.

Knights from the Kingdom of Winfiel were seen as citizens of their homeland before they were knights.

With donations stopped and harsh treatment from those around them, those who could no longer stay on base were now left to wander and find their own place. Yet as people who belonged to both the Church and the kingdom, their stations came with hardship.

Col sympathized with the situation the knights were in as Rhodes balled his fist on his knee and said in a strained voice, "But nothing about our faith has changed at all..."

A tear fell onto his fist.

Rhodes panicked when he realized he was crying, but when Myuri gently placed her hand on his shoulder, he could no longer contain himself. Myuri embraced him, cradling his head, and looked over to Col. Her expression was troubled and bewildered.

When it came to the kingdom challenging the Church, he believed there was a great deal of justice in the struggle. The Church rested on their laurels of privilege and indulged in corrupt practices. He still believed that all needed to be righted one day.

However, by creating change in the world, especially as the movement grew bigger, there would inevitably be people who got caught up in it. People who belonged to the Church were no exception.

There were those of legitimate faith within the Church as well, and Col had never intended on hurting those people at all. That said, the great waves of society could not be turned back, nor did he think that undoing it all would be the right step.

In the face of Rhodes's pain and sadness, all Col could do was fold his arms.

His actions were hurting people he had never even thought of.

He doubted either apologizing or ignoring them was the right decision.

It was times like these that prayer and faith were powerless.

The least he could do was add more kindling to their campfire.

When Col woke up the next morning, Rhodes was already gone.

Their escort, who was poking at the glowing remains of the fire with a stick, told him that the boy had set off before the sun rose.

He explained briefly that it was because, though the boy was just a trainee, he had still shed tears before other people.

The Knights of Saint Kruza were in pitiful straits, having fallen through the cracks created by the conflict between the kingdom and the Church. When Col thought about how he had a hand in at least exacerbating those cracks, he felt partially responsible for the boy's tears.

"I wonder if the abbey will accept him."

The escort, who was boiling cow's milk, most likely for their breakfast, looked at Col, then back at the fire before answering.

"I'm not sure about that."

"But he is a part of the Knights of Saint Kruza. Would it not be an honor to welcome him in?"

"I doubt any large organizations with long histories like the Brondel Abbey would be willing to accept such obvious danger with open arms. The knights are both friend and foe to both camps—the most painful position to be in during a war."

"...Is that from experience?" Col asked, and the escort shrugged.

"I was a mercenary before Heir Hyland took me in. And before that, I lived in a border village that was constantly being seized by different powers. The lord we pledged allegiance to changed daily, which meant no one trusted us at all, and we were persecuted. We stayed on the same land the whole time, yet I only ever remember it feeling like we were constantly lost."

Col remained silent, and the escort smiled slightly.

"The only strange part was the food."

"The food?"

"Even though these countries were neighbors, their eating habits were completely different. One place typically boiled their meat, while the other usually grilled it over a fire. Our village changed hands constantly, and whenever it did, we'd switch from boiling our meat to grilling it and vice versa. All so that our new rulers wouldn't see us as outsiders who didn't belong." There was a faint smile on the escort's face as he sighed, as though going back through his memories of the time. "And whenever we would welcome the new

lord with a feast, he would throw the meat on the ground, claiming it was the food of pretenders. When the boy said they hadn't changed at all, it struck a painful chord with me." The escort suddenly took on a serious look and raised his head. "My apologies. A terribly boring story, that is."

"Oh, no, not at all..."

Now expressionless, the escort continued to mind the fire.

It was a story of how one's position and allies were far fickler than the weather.

Col stood with a sigh and peeked into the cart bed to find Myuri, who had fallen asleep on the cargo as her bedding, already awake, staring at a piece of cloth.

"What is that?"

"Mm," she made a noise in the back of her throat in response, reluctantly sat up, and raised her arms high to stretch. "The knight gave it to me. He said, 'We'll meet again when I've grown.'"

What she held was a dyed piece of cloth with the Knights of Saint Kruza crest on it—crossed swords in front of the crest of the church.

"He was a knight like the kind I'd hear about in stories, but...he turned out to be a crybaby. He smelled like tears."

It was a common plot point in bards' songs for a knight to give a part of his clothing with the crest of his order as proof of his standing to a girl in a village on his way to slay a dragon.

As he thought about how this actually happened in real life, Myuri turned to Col, her nose still pressed against the crest, an impish glint in her eye.

"Isn't this a love letter? Are you jealous, Brother?"

All he could respond with was a tired smile.

"I thought he was a wonderful man."

Myuri immediately puffed out her cheeks, blew on the crest, then added, "The boy said he was born in this area."

Even though Rhodes was likely older than her, it felt right for Myuri to call him a boy, and Col could not help his stiffening smile.

“I said to him, you seem like you’re having a hard time, why not go home for a bit? He’s a noble kid, right? He acted graceful and everything, at least.”

“One needs to be of a certain standing to have the freedom to become a knight, so that may very well be true.”

“But if he was born here, then wouldn’t he know that wearing so little at this time of year would be rough on him...? When I asked him about that, it seemed like he had no idea. He told me that someone higher up in his unit sent him here only because he was born in the area. He actually hasn’t been back since he was little, when he was chased out.”

He could imagine Myuri and Rhodes chatting before he departed, when the stars were still twinkling in the sky.

It was a heartwarming scene, but there was something she said that caught his attention.

“Chased out? Do you mean from his house?”

“He said he’s the sixth son in the family. The only one that will take over the household is the oldest brother. The second and third are kept safe just in case something happens to the first brother, but they’re tossed out like the rest once everyone grows up, he said.”

That was the nobility’s system of primogeniture.

If all of one family’s assets were divided among many children, then the holdings would need to be broken apart, scattering the household’s wealth.

And so, just as a bird might remove its weaker offspring from a nest, the unnecessary children were often discarded.

“All the unneeded boys end up becoming knights. On the flip side, it sounds like the oldest boys don’t really ever get to be knights. I had no idea.”

The idealistic and fantastical world of knights was merrily told of in the Nyohhira bathhouses.

Those of noble spirit volunteer to get together, to fight for the sake of justice,

occasionally cut down evil, slaughter legendary creatures, and save those in need.

But pulling back the curtain made it evident that the system of knighthood in reality was shaped by the raw circumstances of the world.

Or perhaps that was exactly why they sought to present an idealized version of themselves.

“I just thought he was cool, and brilliant, I guess,” Myuri said, as though she was waking from a dream. “Oh, but...,” she turned to Col, “you’re still cool and brilliant, okay, Brother?”

Col could do naught but smile in response to her transparent follow-up. As he skillfully dodged her when she approached to cling to him, he looked off in the direction he suspected Rhodes went.

The boy both was and was not a part of the Knights of Saint Kruza, and both he and the knights were and were not citizens of the Kingdom of Winfiel.

He felt a strange déjà vu because he considered it a lot like his relationship with Myuri.

Just as he had to decide on their relationship for their use of a coat of arms, Rhodes and his comrades had fallen into a situation alone and helpless, unable to attain aid from anyone else since their position was so ambiguous.

Col simply prayed that the wandering knights would have better luck finding a suitable name.

“Hey, what should I do with this crest?”

Myuri looked at Col with a face that suggested she had received something much too precious.

“Those are his feelings. Keep it safe.”

Myuri then drew up her shoulders and narrowed her eyes at him.

“You really don’t know anything about girls, do you?”

“What?”

As Myuri leaped down from the cart, Col just stood there silently.

When they departed after eating breakfast, Col saw her sewing the crest into her sash as a fringe, but he could only muster another weary smile.

The escort was not wrong when he said the abbey was only a stone's throw away.

As the sun rose and they traveled beneath the cloudless, blue sky, they soon spotted a building surrounded by a massive stone wall.

"Whoa, it's like a fortress..."

"It is a very, very old abbey. It was founded in an age when war with the barbarians still raged," Col said, and Myuri nodded, impressed.

But conversely, as Myuri sat awed by the building's size, Col found that the Brondel Abbey seemed smaller compared to his memory of it from childhood. The stone wall was aged, of course, having protected this house of God for centuries, but it had not been rebuilt.

He felt emotional at how much he had grown.

He had been much younger than Myuri back then, when they had arrived here on horseback in the snow. He realized that may have been the point in time when he had been able to touch Holo the Wisewolf's tail the most, and a smile unwittingly crossed his face. Myuri stared blankly at him.

"Is it the shepherd you will be seeing?" the escort asked.

"Yes. I believe the building we're looking for is somewhere on the grounds. Either way, we will visit the abbey itself to pay our respects."

Myuri seemed upset when Col said that, and he patted her head with a smile.

"It is a big abbey, so we may not be able to see Rhodes."

"It'd be awkward if we did!"

Rhodes had given her a piece of his crest and said they would meet again when he was older and wiser.

It would certainly be awkward if they saw each other again before a full day had yet to pass.

"I shall deliver the letter from Heir Hyland," the escort said, then leaped

lightly from the driver's perch and hurried toward the main gates.

Myuri observed him from the cart bed and asked, "Is the chicken's monastery going to be this big, too?"

It did not seem she had any intent of calling Sharon, the eagle avatar, by anything other than "chicken."

"I wonder...I have heard that this abbey has received many donations from the rich and nobility, and has engaged in a great deal of trade."

"I guess it won't be so big because the chicken and your inferior copy don't seem so good at making money."

Col smiled wryly in response to Myuri's blunt statement, but he thought it was just right for a monastery to be bad at trade. The Brondel Abbey had hoarded so many assets that when they had fallen into dire straits, instead of offers of help, they instead attracted flocks of merchants ready to devour its carcass.

"But if they had one this big, then they could put an order of knights or two in it."

"..."

Myuri stubbornly refused to look at Col and stared at the abbey gates.

She had also learned of the position the Knights of Saint Kruza were in, as well as their relationship with the kingdom.

The knights had done nothing wrong; there was no reason that a boy who was still a trainee should have to be dispatched to a faraway land, get saddled with a letter requesting aid, and be forced to run through unfamiliar landscapes underdressed for the weather.

Myuri was upset because of the tragic circumstances the knights were facing, but also because she and Col were partially responsible for their current predicament. And yet no one could say either was at fault, but neither did there seem to be a way for both to coexist.

She was likely irritated about the whole situation.

"I know the escort said this already, but the Knights of Saint Kruza are the

pride of the entire Church. I am certain he was welcomed with open arms.”

Myuri nodded when Col said that, then nodded once again as she said, “I hope so.”

The escort returned not too long after to report that while the abbey could not receive pilgrims at the moment, they would allow them to visit the shepherd. He seemed flustered after finding out that was the most they could do, even with Hyland’s letter. Col, personally, felt strangely happy knowing that the pompous impression was identical to his memories of the place as a child.

They entered a passage beside the front gates, cart and all, and a guard sternly told them that they were not to enter any buildings besides the shepherd’s barn.

The abbey grounds were about as large as a small village while the barn where the shepherd lived was in the corner.

“Ugh, it stinks of sheep,” Myuri remarked.

The building, again, seemed much smaller than it did when Col had come as a child.

The guard knocked on the door, and before long a single old man appeared.

“It has been quite a long time.”

Though one of Sharon’s fellow birds had delivered a letter to him beforehand, Huskins’s boulder-like face did not even twitch. Myuri’s usual energy vanished as she hid behind Col.

“Come on, Myuri, say hello. This man helped your parents many years ago.”

The old man was tall, with long hair and a long beard, and his skin was like tanned leather.

Yet Myuri seemed to sense his true power; she had shrunk so far back, more than any time she had stood in the face of a real royal.

“H-hello...My name is...Myuri,” she said meekly before immediately going back into hiding.

Huskins silently turned his gaze from Myuri to Col.

“To think the day would come that I get to meet that wolf’s daughter,” he said, almost in astonishment, then jerked his chin back and vanished into the building.

It was his signal for them to come in.

“Brother...Is he really a sheep?”

He was a sheep of legend, one that made even Holo the Wisewolf recoil.

Col was nothing but happy since Myuri fully understood how awesome the man was.

“You are no match for him?” he asked, and Myuri vigorously shook her head.

The coat of arms of the Kingdom of Winfiel had an image of a great sheep, whose powerful shoulder muscles framed its face like a lion’s mane, and planted itself firmly into the ground.

The sheep had lived since ancient times, so much so that he treated the wisewolf like a child; it was likely he was much different from ordinary sheep.

“Let’s go inside.”

The escort readjusted the bags on his shoulders, and Myuri clutched the clothes on Col’s back and followed them.

The building looked to be three stories tall from the outside, but most of the inside was open, and half of what would be the second story served as storage for floorboards and other things—it was generally empty. Part of the first story was open to the outside, so the sheep could come and go. Even at that very moment, sheep entered in a fluffy state, and left much slimmer.

“Were you in the middle of shearing?”

“I am afraid I will be using this time to work,” Huskins said, picking up a pair of shears that seemed big enough to snip off a human head.

Though they clearly had bad timing, Huskins did not immediately ask them to leave, so Col rolled up his sleeves and picked up another pair of shears.

“I shall help.”

The escort looked at him quizzically, but he ultimately put down their bags

and picked up another pair, and Myuri eventually followed suit, and so they all got to work shearing the sheep.

The way the fire sat in a sunken hearth rather than a fireplace was the same as it was long ago.

Once they had swept away the ash covering the coals and tossed in new pieces of firewood, a young man with neatly chiseled features brought in a metal pitcher with wooden cups. Inside the pitcher was a drink that Col had never seen before, one that smelled of butter.

“...Are you a sheep?” Myuri asked the young man, who simply smiled and left.

“He comes from a country to the east that I have never heard of before. This is a drink from his homeland.”

Huskins was building a home for other sheep avatars here on abbey land. People like him came from all over in search of a place to stay. He must have been working at this for decades, if not centuries.

Ilenia had said that their ways of thinking did not align, but they both had a similar strength to them.

“What is it you need today?”

Once they finished shearing, the escort left with the other shepherds to wash the wool. Perhaps he was showing his consideration by leaving them alone.

“We came to hear some stories from an old age.”

“Old stories? Are you looking for more holy relics again?”

“Like stories about the knight orders that are gone now.” Myuri popped out from behind Col to say this, and she then disappeared behind him again.

Huskins blinked silently, then sighed.

“Is that what you want to hear...? Literally old stories, I see. There still should be some books on knights in the royal library.”

“We were hoping to hear them directly from someone who was involved,” Col said, straightening his back. “Myuri and I were hoping to create a coat of arms that only the two of us can use. And we believed that someone of your standing

must have been involved in some way in the tales of the knights and the royal family's establishment."

When Col said it out loud, he realized how there truly was an uncomfortable meaning to what he said.

But when he noticed how Myuri pressed her forehead against his back as she hid behind him, he thought how this was the most he could do to face Myuri's feelings for him.

"...If my memory serves correctly," Huskins began, sitting stone-still, "they call you the Twilight Cardinal."

Huskins had never been a recluse. He kept his eyes and ears wide open, all so that he could better protect his fellow sheep. It was likely that he relied on the sheep to gather information on the outside world as well.

"A priest and a wolf girl...You are essentially trying to mix oil and water."

"Yes. That is why we decided to get a crest of our own."

In place of a different kind of vow.

The old man must have grasped the hidden meaning in his words.

Huskins inhaled so deeply his back seemed to swell.

He seemed both surprised and as though he was trying to hold back a laugh.

"You came for quite the odd reason last time, and that still holds true now." He tilted his head sideways in amazement, cracking the bones in his neck. "Old stories, was it? I doubt they will be much help from what you've told me," he said, then took the metal pitcher sitting in the middle of the fire, and poured its contents into his own cup. The handle seemed to be fashioned out of walnut or a similar type of wood, finished in an elaborate carving. Col doubted this was Huskins's personal hobby, so it was likely that of one of the other sheep who lived here, and having caught a glimpse of their peaceful life here instilled a sense of calm within him.

There came the rich smell of butter. Col took a sip from his cup, too.

"I think it'd be a lot of help," Myuri piped up. "I was happy when my brother brought up the crest, but...then I learned that they're not easy things to make

when I did some reading in a library in a big city.”

Huskins’s glass-like eyes turned to Myuri, and Col, too, looked at her in surprise.

“I read a book with you in it, and it was amazing. What an adventure!”

“...It was the boy who did all the running about.”

The story of the kingdom’s founding started with when the first king inherited territory from his father at a young age, then joined the war to drive out the savages from the island as the first noble. Of course, since it was the tale of the founding of their country, it was packed full of exaggerations and dramatizations. Most people would accept the golden sheep who appeared at every important point to save the king as just one more stretch of the imagination among many others.

But Huskins’s simple statement led Col to realize that the stories were essentially fact. It told him that there had been such a delightful adventure between a massive, silent sheep, with its golden wool, and an energetic young noble who burned with hope.

“A crest is like all of those adventures and stories pressed together...which made me think that my brother and I might still be too young. I thought maybe it’d be rude to everyone else if we put ours in with the rest of theirs.”

Despite how overjoyed she had been, Myuri had apparently accepted the reality of the situation rather calmly.

Conversely, it almost sounded like she wanted a story worthy of a crest, but Col’s thoughts vanished in Huskins’s laughter.

“An admirable girl. I almost doubt you are the wolf’s child.”

Huskins gave the impression of being a taciturn sage of the fields, but he looked surprisingly like a kind old man when he smiled.

The man sipped on the buttery drink, then said, “Your mother was a truly impudent wolf...”

Col recalled the unaffable conversation from so long ago, and it gave him an indescribable feeling.

“Yes. There was such a tale. One that everyone thinks of as a fairy tale nowadays. One that no one in the human world would accept as fact, one that has been buried in the sands of time.” Huskins sighed. “The only ones who have ever come to this abbey because they had heard that the golden sheep of legend still lives on here are your parents. Even before they came, and long after. To be honest...” He cut himself short, then shrugged. “I was happy. We have chosen to hide ourselves beneath the grit in the very depths of time. I was almost dazed by the brilliance when I saw there are those who still boldly fight against its tides.”

His eyes relaxed, reminiscing on old times, and a faint smile crossed his face.

When he did that, Col wondered if it was Huskins who picked out the metal pitcher.

“Your parents gave me a breath of fresh air. I may be able to persevere for another hundred years yet.” Huskins looked at Myuri. “Young wolf, you who wishes to know the past for the sake of the future, what is it you want to hear?”

Myuri’s ears and tail popped out, and she emerged from behind Col.

“The story of you and the king needs to come first, of course!”

One corner of Huskins’s mouth raised in a smile and he said, “I wonder if I can recall what happened,” and he began to tell his tale.

The story Huskins told them was of him fighting alongside the first king to unify the island, before it had yet to be called a kingdom. It gave them a different impression than the story they had heard at the amulet stall; it did not sound as though the country was quickly united after the ancient empire and the Church soldiers invaded the island and kicked out the savages. As the ancient empire entered a gradual decline, the Church could not afford to stay involved in the affairs of this distant island country forever, so the knights from both the empire, which had finally put down roots on the land, and the Church began to vie for hegemony. It was in the resulting chaos that Huskins seized his chance to visit the island, constantly searching for an opportunity to profit during the fighting.

The forts and bases each force in the battle built during this era served as the basis for the Brondel Abbey, the Rausbourne cathedral, and even the kingdom’s

major cities today.

For nearly two hundred years, the island was caught in a loop of battle and temporary peace.

It was then that Winfiel I, the founding father of the Winfiel Kingdom, appeared.

It was a typical story in times of war—he took over after his father perished in battle, obtaining land at a very young age. Huskins, who had been wandering about, searching for a place to build his retreat for other sheep, knew that he could use this young lad for his own purposes and approached him. And that was when they first met.

But he was immediately shocked by the boy's attitude. Rather than burning with ambition, he contained boundless optimism; it did not bother him to stick his neck into a disadvantageous battle and help those suffering.

Huskins could not leave the innocent boy alone; he would sometimes use his power as the golden sheep to help him both overtly and covertly. But one day there came a decisive event. When one of the king's men captured a wild sheep that had wandered into their camp, the king decided not to eat it for dinner, but to bind a letter into its wool and let it free.

In the letter he expressed his thanks to the golden sheep.

It was then that Huskins was convinced that if it were the young boy who united the island, then it would most certainly be a peaceful country. Huskins then revealed to him who he was, openly lending a hand to the young noble so that they might take one step closer in uniting the country.

Both Myuri and Col were enthralled by the story.

The escort appeared in the middle of the retelling, interrupting to use a wooden, viselike contraption to squeeze the water out of the washed clump of wool, but by sunset the country was united at last, and they came to the part where the once-young noble became king, and the sheep with golden wool announced that he would be stepping down from the public stage, as he belonged to an ancient era.

“You didn't see him at all after that?”

“The boy happened to come here once and we ran into each other, but that is all. We of course pretended not to know each other, but that year the court ordered a whole mountain of wool.”

The relationship between the men had become like tarnished silver, and Myuri sighed as though she had taken a swig of hard liquor when she heard that.

“And the only time after that was when he summoned me as he lay on his death bed. A servant of his came here, stating the reason was that he had to return the money he borrowed during the war.”

That was a topic that frequently came up in stories of war. A defeated army would stop at a poor village, faithfully leaving behind a bond of debt for them in exchange for food and lodging. Then, several years later, when they become royalty after a miraculous victory, they return to the poor village with gold in hand.

“What did you talk about?” Myuri asked.

They must have had plenty to talk about. Huskins shrugged in response to her question.

“I asked him why the sheep in his crest had such short wool.”

When he mentioned that, Col thought back on the crest and sure enough, the wool was short enough that one could see the sheep’s legs. That naturally implied that Huskins’s true form was a sheep with very long wool. Not only that, but he was a sheep said to have golden wool, serving as the basis for the myth that one could even find money inside it, so he may have had his strong opinions about his own wool. But still, the senior statesmen that surrounded him must have been shocked when a shepherd said this to the king on his deathbed.

“What did the king say?”

Huskins looked down at the flickering coals in the fire, and sulked, “A fluffy sheep is not very stylish.”

Myuri snorted when she heard the answer, clutched her stomach, and laughed.

But the tears pooling in the corner of her eyes were not simply from laughing too hard.

That was their final exchange before an eternal parting.

It was an inevitability that they would meet and work together during the unification of the island.

“And that is how the crest came to be. That is the way crests are designed,” he said coolly, perhaps because he was embarrassed.

Myuri, however, had been so moved and laughed so hard at Huskins’s story to the point it zapped the energy from the hairs in her tail.

“...It’s not fair you get a story like that,” Myuri said sincerely, and Huskins replied with a blank expression.

“We shepherds often say the grass is greener on the other side.”

“Huh?”

“From what I have heard, you have had quite the journey yourself.”

Myuri looked at Col, then for some reason felt disappointed.

“We’ve had a lot of adventures, sure, but...Brother isn’t as witty as the king.”

It was a mean thing to say, but he likely would not be able to have such a striking conversation like that on his deathbed.

That sounded far more like something Myuri’s parents might do.

“But the sun has set while we were talking...What, have they not gathered the sheep yet?” Huskins turned back to look at the barn and said, “You gather the sheep for me. You are a wolf, no?”

“Okaaay,” Myuri replied with unusual sincerity, got up from her seat, and rushed out.

Col moved to follow her, but Huskins suddenly spoke to him.

“Did the wolf and the man get on well?”

It made Col a bit happy to know that Huskins was wondering what happened to the pair after they last met.

“No, what a foolish question. The girl would not be here if they did not.”

“She and Mister Lawrence run a bathhouse in a place called Nyohhira, the hot spring village.”

“A bathhouse in Nyohhira?” He raised an eyebrow in surprise, but that quickly transformed into a slight smile. “A bit of melancholy clung to that wolf, I suppose. It is excellent that she found a home somewhere so lively.”

“And instead, it seems her daughter has grown up to be a little too energetic...,” Col said. Huskins smiled, filling Col’s cup with drink as he said, “You may be right.”

Soon afterward, the whole flock of sheep, chased in by Myuri, entered the barn, and the quiet building quickly filled with bleats and cries.

As they ate supper, Huskins told them stories of knights that had once existed in the kingdom, and held Myuri’s attention captive the whole time. But unlike the tale of the founding of the kingdom, the knight orders of old were full of shady characters, many of whom were ex-bandits.

“People rushed to the island in search of new land and opportunity. War was justified in the name of God, and since one could guarantee a considerable social position by obtaining land, it was perfect for those who wished to wipe away an unwanted past.”

“I’ve seen plays about kings who turned out to be bandit leaders. Is it like that?”

“That is a common tale. Victory in war creates kings, and failure creates highwaymen.”

“I kind of get that, but...I’m a bit disappointed that there were so many orders of knights, but most of them just made up their own crests.”

Perhaps because he had lived with Myuri and her mother, Holo, Col had felt like there were nonhumans in every nook and cranny. But that was not the case in reality; it did not seem like the source for all the thousands of crests were necessarily related to nonhumans.

“Something paranormal that may have existed long ago is just the perfect

thing to give yourself authority.”

As they were talking, the escort huddled with the other shepherds around a boiling pot of food slightly removed from the rest of them.

It seemed he was doing so to deepen his intimacy with those that lived here so to guarantee a safe place for them; he was reliable, and it worked for them.

“That means they likely don’t mind if you create a crest of whatever you fancy.”

When Huskins said that, Myuri looked up to him with wide eyes.

“Even if they make your wool short?”

The old sheep jerked his head back and barked out a couple of laughs that sounded like coughs.

“That’s right.”

Myuri turned to Col and grinned.

She had thought more deeply about the crest than he had and accepted it.

He could tell from the smile she gave him that the apprehension she felt because of how important this all was to her had finally been dispelled.

Col wondered if it was even necessary for them to come all the way to Huskins to hear stories about the past, but there was meaning to it.

In a slightly self-deprecating thought, he considered how glad he was that he did not spend the entire time of rest Hyland had given to them cooped up in his room in Rausbourne, translating the scripture.

“By the way,” Huskins then said. “How are you related to the boy who arrived right before you?”

He must be talking about Rhodes. This abbey did not normally get streams of visitors, so it was natural for them to think they were related.

“Do you mean the boy from the Knights of Saint Kruza?”

Huskins took a sip of his warmed wine as though saying, *Precisely*. That led Col to believe that some of his fellow sheep were living in the Brondel Abbey in the guise of monks.

“We found him collapsed on the side of the road on the way here and cared for him. He was oddly dressed for how cold it is—not too many layers, but wearing mail underneath, so I suspect it was hunger and the cold that did him in.”

“He fell face-first into the road and got covered in mud,” Myuri added, and Huskins nodded slightly.

“I received no word that someone else was accompanying you, and though he was the only one feebly knocking on our gates, he smelled oddly of you. I had to wonder.”

That was understandable.

“Perhaps less of *us*, and more of Myuri?”

Huskins raised one eyebrow slightly, and then raised his shoulders to show Col was correct.

“I guess he’s infatuated with me,” Myuri said flatly. Huskins finally smiled and put down his wine.

“A boy that smelled of you arrived just before you yourselves came. The monks told me that he worked for the Knights of Saint Kruza. I was quite confused.”

“How so?” Col asked in return, thinking it strange, and Huskins quietly turned to look at him.

“From what I can remember, you were a very good child. When you live a life like mine, I almost worry that you might be a little too docile.”

When Huskins suddenly brought up stories from the past, Col grew sheepish.

But when he mentioned that, Col remembered that Huskins had taught him how to walk and live the fields in the winter when they had free time.

“That is why I thought there was a slight possibility that you came to the abbey on secret orders from the king.”

“Oh!”

Col unconsciously let out a cry so great he thought the firewood might’ve

popped from the impact. It was much louder than he thought; he saw the escort, seated at his own banquet table a short distance away, turn to look at him.

But Col knew not what to say. Because despite how they had come here in this season, in this state of affairs, he had not considered the possibility at all.

The Brondel Abbey had a history longer than that of the kingdom, and maintained great power and wealth. There were plenty of reasons one might think this a sinister visit, like the Twilight Cardinal had come to ask for help from an old acquaintance.

“No need for excuses.”

There was plenty of evidence.

Despite what Huskins said, there were only two judgments:

Guilty, or innocent.

And they seemed to be innocent in his eyes.

“I can tell if someone is hiding something. I knew right away that you were truly thinking of nothing.”

Col drew up his shoulders in embarrassment, when Myuri, who sat beside him, said with a sigh, “When I was sewing the crest scrap onto my sash, he was smiling the whole time.”

“Huh?” Col replied absently, and Myuri seemed as though she did not know if she should laugh at him or be angry with him.

“Remember what Miss Eve said to us? Insurance.”

When she said that, it finally came together.

There was plenty of reason for the abbey to suspect that they were scouts sent by Hyland on behalf of the kingdom’s interests.

Even if it was likely that Huskins would be on their side, as he was both an old acquaintance and the embodiment of a sheep, it was hard to be so certain about how the other monks would feel. Then came the question of what they should do to avoid trouble.

The answer was to wear the crest of the Knights of Saint Kruza, the pride of the entire Church. They certainly would not wear the coat of arms of their greatest enemy.

“You’d be the lamb that falls right off the cliff if I weren’t around, Brother.”

“There are always one or two in the flock.”

It was a rare moment where wolf and shepherd saw eye to eye.

Col did not want to take the brunt of it, so he had no choice but to look away.

“Your name is one I hear a lot, so I was looking forward to seeing how things would turn out,” Huskins said, pouring warmed wine from the metal pitcher. “And the enjoyment has surpassed my expectations.”

It sounded as though Huskins was both complimenting and not complimenting him, but Col was at least relieved that the old man did not suspect them. It seemed he would have no choice but to lay down and take it when Myuri teased him for being a dolt in the future, however.

“Or perhaps that is the reason why word of you has spread so far and wide.”

Col decided to interpret that as a positive assessment.

The wine tasted rather sour, but the cup also warmed him.

Shepherds had early mornings.

The shepherds who were employed by the abbey started their day with vespers, so they did not so much wake up at dawn, but more in the middle of the night. As people borrowing space from Huskins and the other shepherds, they could not simply stay sleeping while they were getting ready for work.

Though Col told Myuri about this ahead of time so that she would wake up, he ultimately did not have to worry about her. She was instead thoroughly interested in the shepherds’ lifestyle, something she was unable to experience in Nyohhira, so she followed Huskins and the rest of them into the pitch-black field.

Col thought that he originally should have gone with them, but Huskins told him he did not need to push himself. It was clear from how their escort was not similarly stopped when he went with Myuri that they must have universally

thought Col would only hinder them.

As he sat in the quiet barn, listening to the crackling of the fire, the distant voices of the monks praying, and the few sheep that remained in the barn, he found it impossible to fight the drowsiness. He dozed off, and the next time he opened his eyes, the sun was high in the sky, and Myuri was returning with the sheep, mud splattered on her face.

“They have tough work every day, but it can be so interesting.”

Her thoughts were so straightforward, he could not help but smile; he then wiped her face, combed out her hair, and they all came to sit together for breakfast.

Afterward, they watched as the shepherds sheared the sheep and processed the wool, and Col joined in afterward.

Col brought the freshly sheared wool to the nearby stream to wash it, dunked it in the water, pulled it out—becoming so heavy when wet that he almost thought someone was holding onto it from the other side—then wrung it out.

Since Myuri did not have much strength in her arms, she waded into the shallow stream, chilly from the melting snow, to step on the wool to keep it from floating away as she shivered, then hung it in the large wooden vise to squeeze out the water.

The lunch they were served after that was one of the most delicious meals of Col’s life, second only to the bread Holo and Lawrence had given him when they first whisked him off the street.

After their pastoral morning and a quick afternoon nap, there was a new wrinkle.

“Do you wanna see the library?”

As Col was helping with maintenance on the scissors for the afternoon shearing, Myuri came to ask him a question.

“I told Old Man Huskins I want to see it because there are lots of old stories there, and he said he’d talk to them so I could, but I’d need to donate.”

She held out her hand.

“...And I suppose it was on purpose you did not tell me this ahead of time.”

“Because I saw Heir Hyland pay money before going into the library,” she said, smiling calmly.

Since she already knew about it, that meant she must have imagined Col would tell her that reading books in a library was not worth paying money.

It was Hyland who held all their travel expenses, so he needed to warn her against wasting their money.

But Myuri worked out that if Huskins did the negotiating for them, then her hardheaded brother had no way to refuse. It was only in times like this that she showed rapid growth.

A couple of coppers were very likely not suitable for the Brondel Abbey library. As someone who knew intimately how much time and money it cost to maintain a library, Col understood that they were not asking for donations out of spite. Col rummaged in his coin purse and pulled out some *lute* silvers, which were poor in quality but not in value.

“This is coming out of our return trip meal budget,” he warned Myuri as he placed the coins in her palm.

“*Hiss.*” Myuri bared her fangs, then rushed off to Huskins.

She did not return until the sun set; the smell of ink, leather, and dust was so strong that it almost won out over the delicious aroma of dinner, and Col noticed that she was acting very meek, very well behaved.

He was worried she might have read a sad story since she snuggled into his blanket, and it was only after a long bout of hesitation that she finally spoke.

“They said they need a donation for every day I use the library...”

Myuri, in his arms, peered up at Col with wide eyes, and he sighed.

“You need to be better at thinking things through.”

She buried her face in his chest with a glower, hiding it. The following day, she rushed off to the library once morning prayer was finished, silver in hand once again.

Despite that, he was still thankful for the peaceful hours, and he helped the shepherds out with their work just as he did the day before. He thought about how wonderful it would be if he could carry on with this comfortable lifestyle and also get to spend some time meditating in the evening. Despite how much trouble it was to build a monastery like Myuri wanted, it might be nice to create a monastic order that lived a life like this once the conflict between kingdom and Church calmed down, or so he thought.

He was convinced that God must be looking down on the ideas he dreamed of.

Once the morning work was finished and he returned to the barn, he noticed how the sheep who had come back early to be sheared seemed uneasy. It was not long before he realized why that was.

Sitting on the crossbar of the open skylight in the roof was a lone eagle.

The bird was unmistakably Sharon.

CHAPTER THREE



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Huskins, of course, realized right away that this was not a normal eagle, and he seemed to understand from Col's reaction that it was someone he knew.

That said, they couldn't simply strike up a conversation where people could be watching. With an air of perfect nonchalance, Huskins whistled, then extended his arm toward Sharon, and though Sharon seemed somewhat bothered by the effort, she flew down to land on his arm.

"It must have escaped from a noble's house." Huskins pointedly spoke loud enough for any bystanders to hear, then asked Col to assist him.

Col cleared out a large, vine-woven basket, and carefully covered Sharon with it. He wanted to believe that she was deliberately staring at him right up until she was put in the basket.

When the three of them left the barn, Huskins asked, "So you are the tax collector that caused a ruckus in Rausbourne."

Her shrill cry was less a reply and more an expression of discontent. Huskins sighed slightly and removed the lid from the basket. He then opened the door to a nearby building that looked like a large shed and led them inside.



It was a storage place for spun thread, and it smelled aggressively of wool.

"I didn't think the golden sheep I heard of in rumors would be exactly where the legend said."

Huskins only replied with another slight sigh at Sharon's remark.

"I don't suppose you've come bearing delightful news, have you?" Col asked.

Sharon should have been out to examine the building for the construction of the monastery about now.

"Unfortunately not. The monastery plot was in a worse state of neglect than we'd imagined, and since we couldn't stay long, we quickly returned to Rausbourne. The second we arrived, we came face-to-face with trouble. Then it turns out you're off on a little jaunt. Hyland's sent a fast horse this way, but just waiting for that would waste two or three days. Get packed and be ready to head back. You'll meet the horse along the way."

Sharon's true identity was kept secret from Hyland, so she must have flown here on her own accord.

"I don't want Clark finding out I'm gone, so I want to get back as fast as possible. Keep your questions quick."

Sharon's true form was also kept secret from Clark. It was not that she did not trust him, but she felt that telling him of her truth would only burden him due to his kindness.

"What do you mean by trouble?"

"The Knights of Saint Kruza are in Rausbourne."

Col's eyes widened for a brief moment in shock, but it immediately made sense to him.

"...The cathedral doors are open now, so they likely chose it as a temporary source of support."

"Events are like a herd of sheep. Once one appears, more are sure to follow."

Though Sharon was rather birdlike in her expressionlessness, she still seemed puzzled by Col and Huskins's exchange.

“We encountered a young knight-in-training affiliated with the Knights of the Saint Kruza along the way here. We found him collapsed on the side of the road, ill-equipped, and with a letter requesting aid in his pocket.”

Sharon was the vice president of the tax collection association, whom the merchants in the harbor town feared. It was likely that she had heard news of the Knights of Saint Kruza’s financial struggles, and must have guessed as much from what they told her about Rhodes.

She spread her wings and shivered in exasperation.

“So they’re not for war, then?”

“I think there is a very low chance of such, but...of course, I doubt it is simply a courtesy call.”

“Hmph. We’re connected to the Twilight Cardinal. If there was a roster of wanted heretics, your name’d be right at the top of the list. Could it be that?”

That seemed to be the reason why Sharon flew out here herself. Though she was the embodiment of an eagle, her partner Clark was a regular human, so she felt a personal responsibility to protect him.

“I cannot say that will not happen for certain, but...”

Col glanced to Huskins, and the golden sheep said, “That is hard to imagine so. If they have the resources to be hunting heretics, then they would not send a lone boy trudging through the mud with a letter seeking assistance.”

It was hard to tell if Sharon found that answer persuasive, but she no longer asked any questions.

“Doesn’t seem peaceful, either way. I’m going back first.”

“O-oh, all right. Thank you.”

The flapping of her wings disturbed the dust on the wool in the shed.

As Col coughed and tried to clear the air around his face, Sharon flew out one of the windows, left open for fresh air.

“Are you leaving?” Huskins asked briefly.

“We must. Heir Hyland will be compelled to deal with the situation, I believe.”

The corners of Huskins's eyes wrinkled at his response, and he said, "You may be negligent of your footing, but you are heading in the right direction."

"I..."

"Those with you are watching your footing. Be confident and step boldly with every stride. At least in my story, it always served me well."

His tale was that of a young noble with boundless optimism and an ancient sheep who has continued to speak of ages of yore, even today, by willingly putting himself through hardship. And the two of them flew like a spark through an era long past.

Col almost said, *We are not nearly as awesome*, but he managed to keep it in.

Myuri wanted to incorporate precisely that type of awe into their crest.

He could not reject what Huskins said.

"I will keep that in mind."

Huskins, who had his shoulders drawn up, patted Col on the back, then left the shed.

"Um, I suppose I must inform the escort that we will be leaving first..."

Though the escort may not outright say no if Col told him they would be returning to the city right away, he would certainly be suspicious.

"If you want to keep the eagle a secret, then tell him you feel uneasy because the statue of the Holy Mother shed tears."

This was the Brondel Abbey—miracles that announced approaching danger were a possibility here.

"Then I shall go fetch Myuri."

As Col was about to run off, Huskins spoke again.

"No, I will go to the library."

"What? It's all right. Even though I only came here once ten years ago, I still remember where the library is."

There had been many merchants around back then, and he clearly

remembered being shown a catalog of holy relics.

He had been so enthusiastic, feeling as though it was the first time he had been of genuine use to Lawrence and Holo. There was no way he would forget something like that.

Huskins still seemed as though he would say something, but he remained silent in the end.

Col rushed forth, following his memory and eventually passed under the statue of a demon, placed to threaten anyone who might steal a book, and searched for the library manager.

The manager was a thin man with a long nose who tediously pointed at the users' log.

When Col told him that he had urgent business with his companion, the manager simply shrugged.

"Then leave the books as they are, and simply bring the book key to me. You may damage the books if you try to rush when putting them away."

Keys for books—though the practice had become less common in recent years, old libraries sometimes still kept their books locked and chained to desks or lecterns.

"I am aware, thank you," Col responded, and the manager seemed to understand that he was someone already familiar with books, so he nodded in an exaggerated manner and opened the door.

The sudden scent of dust, leather, and ink that wafted his way filled him with a sense of nostalgia, and he pressed deeper into the thick forest of the library.

There he spotted Myuri, clinging to a lectern with a large book open in front of her.

"Myuri?"

Though there was no one else around, he called to her in a hushed voice out of habit.

She practically leaped up in shock, more concentrated than he thought she would be.

“Wh—? Ah, oh, Brother?”

“Myuri, Miss Sharon arrived not long ago. We must—”

“What? That chicken?”

Her mood had soured, but that was quickly replaced by panic when she noticed what Col was looking at.

“Oh, that’s—I—”

Even when she shut the large book, Col was already reaching out to the stack of books that sat next to her. He flipped one open, and he knew right away what kind they were.

“...These books, they’re...”

Myuri bit her lower lip and looked away, refusing to answer with her whole being.

But there was no room for her to make excuses. When he opened the third, then fourth book, he saw they were all essentially the same.

They all had illustrations of bears, and one of them clearly showed a giant bear reaching for the moon.

“...”

Myuri stubbornly remained silent. She was always tough to deal with when she acted like this, even back in Nyohhira.

She usually did this either when she was ready to resist to the very end because she was convinced she had done nothing wrong and no one would convince her otherwise, or she understood that she had done something wrong but steeled herself because she refused to apologize at all.

And her coming to secretly read stories of the Moon-Hunting Bear fell under both.

“...We need to leave anyway. Miss Sharon came to inform us about the state of Rausbourne.”

He took Myuri’s hand, and though she showed no response, she did not try to shake him away, either.

The topic of the bear was a complicated one for the both of them. Neither of them knew how to act when the subject came up.

Col believed that Myuri would follow if he tugged on her, so he began to collect the keys on the table with his free hand.

“How many did you have in total?”

“...Five.”

The number matched. He nodded and they left the library, handing the keys to the manager on the way out.

“Oh, I see.” Col realized something as they descended the stone steps outside of the library. “The reason a sleepyhead like you woke up in the middle of the night to take the sheep out was to talk with Mister Huskins, correct?”

Huskins, after all, had allowed the escort to tag along, but stopped Col. Later on, he knew that Myuri was reading books about the bear in the library, and was aware that Col would not be happy to talk about the bear at all, so he tried to stop Col from going.

And that led him to one thing.

“So the reason we came here in the first place is—”

“No, that’s not why,” Myuri said and stopped in her tracks. “...I really did want to ask about the crests.”

Col knew she would not go out of her way to lie now, and he had another reason why he did not want to believe she was lying.

Myuri had been so looking forward to receiving her own crest, and they came here to listen to stories about coats of arms because she wanted to pour everything she held dear into the design.

It would be much too sad for him if she told him they were all simply excuses.

“Myuri.” He said her name and lightly shook her hand, which weakly held onto his. “Once we leave and head for the city, the escort will be with us the whole time. And when we arrive in city, we may be caught up in another upheaval. Let us talk now.”

Myuri listlessly stood in the middle of the path, like a lost little girl, but she finally, slowly looked up at him.

“What did the chicken say?”

“The Knights of Saint Kruza have arrived in Rausbourne.”

Myuri’s eyes widened.

“But it did not sound as though they suddenly attacked the city or anything. We should have some time to talk for a bit before we start packing.”

Myuri looked away, not because she did not want to meet Col’s gaze, but perhaps because she was searching for Rhodes, who must be on the grounds somewhere.

She turned back toward him.

“You’re not gonna be mad, Brother?”

Col instead found himself relieved at her question, which was not asked in a way that said she did not want to anger him, but rather in a way that suggested she found it too tedious to deal with him if he did get angry, which was how she usually acted.

“It depends.”

Myuri frowned and sighed.

Silence was the rule in the abbey, which meant it was exceptionally quiet; the only sounds were those of the bleating sheep and the footsteps of the neophytes who worked in the fields coming and going.

Myuri sat with the crates that rested just outside the shed from where Sharon left and said, “I meant it when I said I wanted to hear stories of the kingdom and the knights from Old Man Huskins.”

Her choice of words sounded cranky, but her tone itself was weak.

She did not want Col to doubt her when it came to that fact.

Col nodded, and after a brief sigh, Myuri continued, “But it’s also true that I wanted to ask about the bear.”

The Moon-Hunting Bear was said to have put an end to the age of spirits.

The legend of the battle between the bear and the other spirits, which apparently took place centuries ago, only remained in the human world now as a fairy tale. There were even stories of valleys carved by the bear's claws, of lakes made from where mountains were plucked out of the ground, of how the mountain was thrown into the sea to create islands.

Each sounded like fantastical stories, but when one gathered a whole lot of those ancient tales, it started to take on a different form. The bear fought with the kings of the forests and mountains, moving from land to land. In the end, it arrived at the western sea and vanished.

And a great deal of spirits died by the bear's hand, bringing their era to an end.

Myuri's parents, Lawrence and Holo, had gathered pieces of the story up to that point on their own journey.

It was likely that the Moon-Hunting Bear did exist, and it was true that it massacred many.

But of all the stories Holo and Lawrence collected, one mystery still remained:

Where did the Moon-Hunting Bear go?

Myuri and Col had heard a bit of what could be related to the answer from Autumn, the embodiment of a whale, with whom they became acquainted in the northern islands. He had told them that there were giant footprints at the bottom of the sea.

And those footprints were consistent with a rumor that spread throughout human society.

Humans used technological power to cut down the forests, sail on boats, and expand the world map. They shone light on mysteries that were once shrouded, and those who survived the age of spirits were rapidly losing places to live. That was the age they lived in now, and new knowledge that brought reason to mystery now illuminated a new facet to an ancient tale.

And that was word of a new continent said to lie at the far edge of the western sea.

In an odd coincidence, the Moon-Hunting Bear also vanished into the western sea.

To Myuri, not only was the Moon-Hunting Bear the object of revenge, the being who killed her mother Holo the Wisewolf's friends from her hometown, but something that signaled the start of a great adventure.

Had she latched on with only one hand, then Col may have been able to gently pry her away.

But she had grabbed on firmly with both hands, and it would not be easy to make her let go.

"You thought that perhaps Mister Huskins could tell a story of that time, right when the Moon-Hunting Bear had gone on its rampage, did you not?"

It was obvious to Col when he said it out loud, but he had not imagined that possibility at all. He was a fool who had not even thought very deeply about why they were visiting the Brondel Abbey in the first place. When the scale of the topic became so grand, much like this one, then he would lose sight of anything even right next to him.

"Cause see, Mother said she was leisurely looking after wheat in a faraway place while that was all happening, and the whale said he was just sitting at the bottom of the ocean, and Miss Ilenia said she's just a little older than me."

Ilenia certainly looked only a few years older than Myuri, but Col was certain she was older than even himself, but he refrained from saying anything.

"Someone who knows what happened then is more valuable than a lump of gold on the side of the road. And Miss Ilenia said that she doesn't get along with Old Man Huskins at all."

Huskins had determined himself to be someone who hid himself beneath the grit in the depths of the flow of time. Ilenia, on the other hand, was a child of the new era, one who set her sights on a land far across the sea as where she would build her country for nonhumans.

Though their goals were similar, their methods and ways of thought were exactly the opposite.

The two were respectively emblematic of the old and the new.

“But if I told you I wanted to ask for stories about the bear, you’d definitely say no.”

“Well...I...”

“But then crests came up, and as I was reading books in the library, I came up with all kinds of other things I wanted to ask, like the sheep crests. That’s when I thought that you might agree with that, too.”

Just as Col had watched Myuri grow from birth, Myuri had been watching Col since the day she was born. And recently, Myuri has had the slight edge on him.

“And I think the story about the bear that I wanted to know about is different from the one you’d think of.”

“Huh?”

Myuri saw the Moon-Hunting Bear as an enemy. Col could not bear the dark eyes she had when they spoke of it and prayed that she did not involve herself with it at all.

But he saw the girl in front of him did not have eyes burning with revenge; instead, she gazed off into the distance, as though steeping herself in memory.

“I was looking at so many crests in those books when something struck me as weird. The more I read about the origins of crest designs, that weird feeling just got even stronger,” Myuri said, looked up, then raised her hand in the direction of the path.

Col turned to see Huskins.

“Crests have stories; they have reasons for the way they are. A knight order that fights at sea will have the design of a turtle with a sail in its mouth and stuff like that.”

That was the Euran Order of Knights, if memory served him well.

But he did not know what sort of relationship this had with the bear.

As he wondered why that was, Huskins approached them.

“Was he angry with you?”

The old man wore a straight face, so it was hard to tell if he was joking.

Myuri sulkily shrugged.

“She told me not to say anything because you would be angry.”

Getting cross with Huskins would accomplish nothing.

But he did have one question.

“What did you talk about with Myuri?”

The Moon-Hunting Bear.

There was something about it that had struck her as strange as she read stories about coats of arms.

“It was shocking to hear. It opened my eyes, too,” Huskins remarked, despite being very much the type that was no longer surprised by anything in this world. “How many hundreds of years ago did that happen...? The tale is like a stone on a dry riverbed—eroded by time, nothing left of it to carve away. Why would one think there was a facet of it that I had never thought of?”

This shepherd was nicknamed the sage of the plains.

The shepherd looked up to the sun as he spoke.

“But there was. Like questions I still had for the sun, which I have been looking at my whole life.”

It did not sound as though Huskins was assisting Myuri simply because he wanted to help a young girl. It was because he had seen value in doing so.

“It’s like the wolf crests, Brother,” Myuri said. *“The bear was the strongest creature ever, but there are almost no crests left of them.”*

“...”

The keeper at the amulet stall had said that coats of arms trends came and went.

In that regard, wolves once served as insignias in the ancient empire, and they fell out of style because they were seen as too old-fashioned.

But the wolves’ mysterious air and image as a hunter that briskly runs through

the woods was still very popular with mercenaries today.

Just as how the deer was chosen as the symbol of the mountains, and the turtle was chosen as the symbol of the seas, it certainly was weird that the bear had not been chosen as a symbol of power.

The king of violence, against whom no ancient spirit could contend.

Col felt as though all the right elements were in place for the world to be overflowing with crests of bears.

“Once I started wondering about that, all the stories of the past that I’d heard just kept getting weirder and weirder.”

“I was at a loss for words myself.” Huskins turned to Col with clear eyes. “When she asked me why the legends of the Moon-Hunting Bear were always at night.”

Col also found himself at a loss. He knew the reason for the question itself, of course. If one mentioned the Moon-Hunting Bear, the image of such was so strongly tied to the night, not least of all because of the “moon” in its name.

But why would she ask such a thing? Was it not simply an easier way of speaking about a being so terrifying?

That did not seem to be the case for Myuri.

“Brother, the Moon-Hunting Bear was big enough to sit on a mountain. Nighttime aside, how is it supposed to hide itself during the daytime?”

“...”

“The thing was supposed to be doing evil deeds left and right, making everyone hate it, but then it would never be able to just take a nap during the daytime, right? If not, then we’d have fairy tales everywhere of a bear bigger than a mountain sleeping on a mountain. The bear’s supposed to be big enough to reach the moon if it stretched out, after all.”

Col had no words, but if he were to say anything, the first thing that came to mind was how it was nonsense to question things like that in a fairy tale.

He himself was so astounded by the reason he said nothing.

That was because right in front of him stood the golden sheep of legend, the one who had lent a hand in establishing the Winfiel Kingdom.

Huskins, the man of legend, said quietly, “Was the *moon-hunting* name an exaggeration?” He shook his head in response to his own question. “As my companions and I ran from it, this is what we thought: No matter how much we ran, we never felt as though we were distancing ourselves from it. Its black shadow was always there. It stood in the glow of the moon and was much like the moon itself. That is how massive it was.”

It was big enough for him to lose his sense of distance, but again, his story took place at night.

“What the bear did during the day, and where it slept...?” There was a half-smile on Huskins’s face. “I cannot even imagine. We never even considered it as something that sleeps.”

Perhaps there were things one could not see when something was too close.

“But when she brought it up, I knew she was right—others would have seen the thing. People around the world like me, who are still here today, who lived at the time.”

There were apparently still stories of sightings of Myuri’s mother, Holo the Wisewolf, from when she ventured north to south.

Which meant it would be a given if a clearer picture of the Moon-Hunting Bear was still around today. There had to have been kings who marveled at its boldness, who wanted a share of its godlike presence.

“It’s sad that there aren’t a lot of wolf crests, but there are solid records showing that there used to be a lot long ago, and there are people who still use them today. But there are so little of bears. If the story of the Moon-Hunting Bear is true, then that’s even weirder.”

Myuri brought up a valid question. Something was not quite right.

The bear was a synonym for strength, so much so that there were old sayings that went *as strong as a bear* and whatnot. That was a perfectly good reason for a bear to be used in a design for a coat of arms.

Even now, a regular bear spotted in the forest was much more dangerous than a whole pack of wolves.

“So when I started looking up bear crests, so many of the families that used those crests died out a long, long time ago. It was like they were cursed.”

“What?” Col asked in return, and Huskins replied, a bit of enjoyment in his voice.

“I knew this young child would come up with an unbelievable idea.”

Myuri’s red eyes widened, and she turned to look at Col.

Her young eyes were intelligent and overflowing with imagination.

“What if the Moon-Hunting Bear could turn into a human?”

Even when the answer was right before their eyes, it could not necessarily be put to use.

“That answers what the bear was doing during the day. It was probably just sleeping like a normal person. But then the story about it disappearing into the western sea gets kind of strange.”

Myuri, whose youth knew no fear, did not even hesitate in an imaginary world.

“It might’ve just wanted to lay low.”

After a terrible war that put an end to an era, the victor, for some reason, vanished into the sands of time.

When he asked why, he knew the easiest answer was that it vanished via its own will.

But if that were the case, then it would give an eerie answer to all the strange questions Myuri had just asked.

“Which means...the reason why there are so few houses that use bear crests is...”

“Exactly.” Myuri grinned. “Because the Moon-Hunting Bear went around killing them. To keep itself hidden.”

“Well, that’s...”

Myuri's take would explain the bear's perplexing story, but it did feel like a stretch. The biggest reason was the question of *why* it wanted to do such a thing. It made sure to only ever appear at night, it put an end to an entire era, and it left its literal claw marks on the world only to leave it unconquered and vanish across the sea to the west in order to hide itself. It even went around killing the humans that worshipped it so that the memory would not live on in the human world...

And it seemed that Myuri's intelligence was not in a place Col could ever reach.

Of course she had thought of that possibility.

Instead, as he looked at her shining face, he understood *that* was the most crucial part to her spirit.

"Sheep and wolves see different worlds. No, I suppose when it comes to this girl, it is more apt to say that the number of stories we have encountered differ," Huskins murmured.

In response, Myuri, who loved stories more than anyone else in Nyohhira, said, "Brother, listen. Once the Moon-Hunting Bear put an end to one era, who was it that took over the next?"

It felt like the ground beneath Col's feet had opened up to the depths of hell. That could not be.

Myuri asked, "Have you ever met God, Brother?"

He had been dropped into a nightmare with his eyes open.

It was that powerful a shock; Myuri sounded as though she was far away.

There was no proof to say her thoughts were correct, of course. He could ignore it as a child's fantasy, something not even worth laughing off.

But Huskins then said, "The scripture is a collection of God's word, penned by several humans. But there are no tales of anyone ever seeing God himself. And there are some odd inconsistencies, as well. I believe you were doing some translating work of the scripture into the vernacular, but has it never struck you, Twilight Cardinal? God is supposed to have created all things, so why does the

Church regard nonhumans as enemies?”

There was once a bear who fought against nonhumans. It, for some reason, went around killing the spirits of the forest.

Though their personalities were polar opposites, both Myuri and Huskins stood on the same side.

How was he to withstand this?

“And, Brother, this was a question that I was thinking about, so I asked Old Man Huskins.” Myuri cleared her throat. “I asked, have you ever met a bear avatar?”

Col turned to Huskins, and he saw the answer was clear. The old man looked as though he had found the key to his shed that he had dropped in the field a hundred years prior.

“Never. I have never met a bear avatar.”

Holo was not the only embodiment of a wolf. Huskins was not the only embodiment of a sheep.

The same could certainly be said for deer, for rabbits.

Which meant that bears should be the same.

“Ten-odd years ago, an odd troupe of folk came bearing interesting stories, but I believe you have them beat in that regard.”

Was it an absurd story, or if not, a grand idea? Either way, it was a dimension to the story that no one had ever considered, a way of thought that no one had ever even attempted.

Col felt dizzy, as though heaven and earth spun round and round, but his eye remained fixed on one point, like the north star.

“So the story about the new continent...is a lie?”

Perhaps the footprints at the bottom of the sea, thought to belong to the Moon-Hunting Bear, was a distraction made to convince others that it vanished into the west.

Perhaps it was just a coincidence that word of a new continent seemed to tie

in with the bear.

When Col asked the question, Myuri pointed to Huskins.

“I remembered what Miss Ilenia said, and she doesn’t get along with Old Man Huskins.”

“...That lamb is more insolent than your mother.”

It was already impressive how Ilenia, whose fluffy, black hair gave a striking impression, and Huskins, who caused even Myuri to flinch, broke in disagreement after an exchange of opinion, but it sounded as though she was harder to deal with than Holo.

“This is how I see it,” Huskins continued. “First, the Moon-Hunting Bear tried to build a country just for people like him.”

The assumption was persuasive, considering how it had started such a big war. And though their methods were different, both the old man in front of him and Ilenia had the same goals.

“But after the war it built the Church, either because building a kingdom just for bears was too much, or it thought that manipulating the human world from the shadows would be much easier. But that was ultimately only the next best thing, as it truly wanted a new land just for bears to live in.

“Even the humans in the northlands at the time were starting to beat back the darkness of the forests. Through their sheer numbers and special power their technology brought, they started to have an influence that didn’t exist in our world.”

“...And that was when they set off in search of a place without humans?” Col asked.

Neither wolf nor sheep responded, simply staring at the only human before them.

It was as though they were telling him to squarely examine the silly story.

Because if their story was correct, then that meant the god they worshipped was not just a sham, but a bear.

Col gripped the Church crest that hung from his neck, clinging to it.

“You believe that is true?” he asked Myuri.

He asked her not as his adorable little sister, but as one who was on the brink of denying his entire faith.

“I don’t think all of it can be true.”

It did not sound as though she was laying down her arms because she knew how earnest he was.

Myuri was smart, enough to leave him speechless at times, and she showed a cool-headed side that rivaled that of Holo the Wisewolf when she thought seriously about something.

“Especially the part about the Moon-Hunting Bear creating the Church. It’d be so funny if that was true. You were shocked, weren’t you, Brother?”

She grinned impishly at him, and he no longer knew if he should be angry with her.

“But if the bear itself was God, then wouldn’t it be more natural for bears to just gather in the Church in droves, like this abbey? But then I wondered if it was possible that someone as old as Old Man Huskins had never met one before.”

The pope sat at the top of the Church, and right beneath him were several people that went by the title of cardinal who act as his administration. The world map was partitioned under their command, and the people who participated in their hierarchical system with titles like archbishop and bishop ruled each of those regions.

Every position on the ladder would frequently be in contact with others, and that was also true for the inquisitors.

If two nonhumans happened to pass each other in town, they would surely recognize each other.

It was impossible to think that no one would notice.

“What is possible is that maybe the Moon-Hunting Bear crossed the sea and found a new continent right away, then went over with the bears who built the Church. If that happened, then that would explain why Old Man Huskins’s never

met a bear. And..." Myuri, whose hands were folded behind her back, tilted her head and grinned mischievously at Col. "...the reason why you've never met God, Brother."

Col grew visibly cross, and Myuri theatrically covered her head and stepped back.

But he had nothing to say in his anger, of course.

To treat such a fantastical story as legitimate was like seriously responding to someone who was sleep talking.

"I'm not gonna ask you to believe me," Myuri said, smiling lightly. "But isn't it a great story?"

If her ears and tail had been out, they would be whipping all over the place.

She was acting with such innocence that it shocked him.

"Real events inspired the oldest fairy tales, which means there are inconsistencies to them, but then there are also new rumors about them. And not only that, but when you put them together, they practically seem to fit. It'd be a total waste if I just ignored it all, right?"

"You..." was all Col said, as he had nothing else to say.

Everything was a plaything to Myuri.

But when he looked at her, he suddenly remembered something.

Very soon after leaving Nyohhira, Myuri had mentioned something as she stared at the world map that hung on the wall of the trading house—she wondered if there was a land out there where she did not have to hide her ears and tail.

Despite how big the world was, it was a cold place for a girl like her.

A sad face and tears did not suit her at all.

Instead, using the whole world as a plaything and getting excited over unbelievable tall tales was like her way of getting back at the cold world, and that gave Col relief.

"There are two things you must promise me when it comes to the Moon-

Hunting Bear.”

“Hmm?”

Myuri blinked as she looked at him.

“One is that you do not think of revenge for the wolves of old.”

When Col said that, Huskins also looked at Myuri. Myuri was more conscious of Huskins than she was of Col, so perhaps he had mentioned something about revenge to him.

He was an old sheep reprimanding a young wolf, just as he was for Holo.

“And...the second?”

Yet Myuri was smart enough not to reply with the first thing that came to her mind.

Col had no choice but to say the second thing.

“There is a god,” he said. “Probably,” he added with a mutter.

Myuri’s eyes widened, and she almost laughed, but she of course knew that she should not, and managed to contain herself.

She cleared her throat and shrugged.

“I think it’d be better if there wasn’t a god. Then you’d look at me all the time instead.”

Col wanted to ask what made her so confident about that, but one could say the answer was also Myuri.

And their banter was also a point of compromise.

“Also, do not deceive me when you are collecting stories about the bear.”

“But you said two things!”

Myuri frowned, scratched her head, then looked to Huskins.

Huskins was expressionless as he always was; he shrugged and looked up to the sky.

“Fiiine.”

She then apathetically grasped Col's outstretched hand.

She was the rambunctious girl who was sulking once her mischief had been uncovered, like she always was.

"If I may suggest a crest..."

"Hmm?"

Myuri looked up at Col.

"What about a wolf looking away in a huff?"

"You *what*?!"

Myuri angrily struck Col's arm.

Col accepted her attacks, but he also didn't think that image would be so bad.

He thought of a wolf sitting with its paws together, its face to the side, staring off into the distance.

It looked like an animal searching for something interesting, always looking toward the future.

It sees a world that no one else could have ever imagined, sitting tensely as though about to dash away at any moment.

Col could not imagine a design that suited Myuri any more than that.

"Brother, you dummy!"

She was a girl more grown up than him, who sometimes said the most outrageous things.

Her jeers echoed throughout the quiet abbey.

They packed their things and quickly left the Brondel Abbey.

As they were getting ready, Myuri seemed to have the book she had just started reading and Rhodes on her mind, so she asked Huskins to take care of both for her. He seemed to have taken a liking to her.

So, along with their escort, Col and Myuri set off. And at noon on the second day, they came across a messenger from Hyland along the road, just as Sharon had said. When the messenger saw how leisurely they looked riding in a cart, he

urged them to ride on horseback in order to pick up the pace. Col thought Myuri might refuse, considering what a terrible time her rear had before, but the place they were staying at during their trip was in the middle of shearing all their sheep. Myuri had received a bag stuffed full of wool, and she insisted that she would be all right this time around.

Myuri did not make a peep when they switched to horseback, either because of the wool stuffing, or because her bottom had built up a tolerance, and on the night of the third day they arrived at the Rausbourne city gates. Col thought they might be made to wait until the next morning, but they were quickly granted passage into the city when they showed the pass Hyland had written for them.

“This is the greatest order of knights from the Church, which means they oppose the kingdom as well. We must be careful.”

Despite how restless Myuri seemed on her fluffy sack of wool, she still nodded.

Though the messenger stated that it did not seem like a particularly delicate situation when he left, they did not know what the situation was like now.

They passed through the rather lonely old town, crossed the river, and entered the new side of the city.

It was night. The sun had set long ago, and those at the Brondel Abbey would be fast asleep by now. But despite the time, Rausbourne seemed unusually lively.

Torches stood along the roads and people were milling about, waving around what looked like swords.

But they did not seem like they were on high alert with a knight order from the Church having entered their walls whatsoever.

“Whoa, Brother, look at that. Is that armor made of wood and cloth?” Myuri said as she pointed to a street corner from atop her horse and her fluffy woolen sack. There stood men wearing flimsy armor, striking their tasseled swords together, yelling lines, then striking their swords at one another again.

“Those are lines from the famous *Battle at Tardanc*.”

It seemed to be a well-known program that illustrated the famous battle.

Despite how one would think a street-corner performance would be shut down so late at night, the people were lively, with some playing instruments here and there. What they all had in common was that each performance had something to do with knights.

Col wondered just what was going on as they arrived in the elegant district where the manors of nobles stood in neat rows; it was quiet here, of course, but they passed well-dressed people who were headed toward the lively festivities along the way.

Perhaps it was because they had just passed the chaotically lit center of town, but when they arrived back in Hyland's manor for the first time in several days, it felt terribly still. That did seem to be simply a trick of the mind, however.

When the servant brought them in, both the messenger and escort, who had guided them along the way, raised their voices in surprise, and then rushed outside.

Col and Myuri exchanged glances, and when the door opened, they saw an unexpected face.

"Well, that was absurdly fast."

"Miss Eve?"

The master of Hyland's manor was gone, and there in her place was a great merchant with a beautiful girl in tow.

Standing next to Eve was a lovely girl who wore a constant smile on her face. She was said to have been born in the desert, and she was the one who held the colorful umbrella for Eve whenever she went outside. Once she had brewed a tea that was popular in the south, she served some fresh grapes to Myuri. Col had no idea where on earth she might have gotten fresh grapes at this time of year, but Myuri was delighted, and she joyously gobbled up the little green things, skin and all.

"I'm here to watch the place," Eve said. In her hands she held the stuffed sack of wool, the one that Myuri had sat on the entire way here. She was checking the wool on the inside, so perhaps she was thinking about purchasing it.

“Is Heir Hyland at the cathedral?”

Many of her maids and servants must have accompanied her, which explained why the manor so quiet.

That said, Col still wondered why the escort and messenger went pale and rushed out of the manor.

“Sure, you could say she’s been continuing talks with the knights at the cathedral, but she’s virtually a hostage.”

Col almost stood from his chair in shock, but Eve was of course nonchalant, and Myuri leisurely continued to munch on her grapes.

“She’s probably fine right now, right?”

“Well, but...”

She swallowed her grape and shrugged.

“Look how lively the city is. I don’t think the knights are cooped up in the cathedral. They’re probably going out sometimes.”

“...”

She sounded so confident, as though she had seen it for herself, so with nothing to say in return, Col turned to Eve.

“It’s like you’ve seen it yourself,” Eve said, then handed the wool sack she was playing with to the umbrella girl. “You’re actually correct. Before the knights came into the city, they very properly sent out an official messenger to the cathedral, and only after they got permission from the city council did their ship appear offshore. Their march into the city was so thoroughly polite. Word of how wonderful, how courteous the Knights of Saint Kruza were, immediately began to circulate.”

“Is...is that so?”

“They’re giving lessons to any guards who want them in front of the cathedral, and all the city girls are placing wreaths of flowers on the heads of the young knights. Knights that fight with the Knights of Saint Kruza are a bit like legendary heroes, you see. And there are some of them that are from the city of Rausbourne, too, so of course the people would get riled up about it. *My house*

used to be on this street, stuff like that. I bet all the people who are celebrating them are feasting in droves tonight again."

Something stung in Col's chest when he heard that.

Rhodes had been born in the region where the Brondel Abbey sat.

But Rhodes had been sent far away from home when he was very young, all so his family could have fewer mouths to feed.

"Well, just as you're making that glum-looking face, I bet some of the knights themselves have some mixed feelings. You heard about that from the little knight-in-training you picked up on the side of the road, didn't you?"

They had already told her about Rhodes.

Col nodded with a sigh, and Eve took a sip of her tea.

"The royal court gives their patronage to the Knights of the Golden Sheep, so they likely could marry whatever girl from whatever regional lord they like. Even if not, there are plenty of places they are free to pop in on. But this is the Knights of Saint Kruza we're talking about. How many people out there can draw where the Island of Kruza is on a map? Even the most seasoned merchant would have a tough time."

"They give everything to God and join the monastic knightly order of Saint Kruza, right?" Myuri asked.

"They have to make vows of lifelong celibacy, all so they don't have children elsewhere and spark a conflict over inheritance. And so in a way, they work to send home a different kind of currency. They're not earning money, but honor."

"Honor?"

When Col asked in return, Eve cleared her throat.

"Oh, your youngest brother has gone off to the Knights of Saint Kruza, has he? My, how outstanding. I would not mind entrusting my daughter to such a family, oh ho—do you get it now?"

Myuri burst out laughing when Eve made her impression of a high-society woman.

“It’s always the older brothers that get to relish in the younger brothers’ activities. Then he’ll marry a good woman, earn a good reputation as the head of a pious household, and then smoothly make his way up in the world. And in the meanwhile, the younger brother gets to drearily swing around a sword on a rocky island that’s hot year-round and doesn’t even have any trees.”

Col understood what Eve wanted to say, but earthly profits alone could not bring one happiness.

Rhodes was certainly the type of person who would find peace not in counting his coins, but in turning the pages of the scripture. There were a good handful of people like that who gathered in the Knights of Saint Kruza.

That was the very reason why it was so painful for their faith to be questioned simply because they happened to be from the kingdom, which now stood opposed to the Church.

“The one who commands the company of kingdom natives in the knights is from a somewhat well-known family called Wintshire. He’s very considerate of his men.” Eve narrowed her eyes slightly, and the corner of her mouth twisted upward in a smile, as though she was trying to withstand pain. “He wants to give them a taste not of a last supper, but a last triumphant return.”

“...”

There came the snapping noise of Myuri biting into a grape.

“So they’re being disbanded?” she asked, but Eve did not look up for a spell.

Eve was also once a noble from this country who fell from her position due to bankruptcy.

What she perhaps saw in her mind’s eye was the sight of last time she bid farewell to her birth home.

“Donations stopped coming in from the kingdom, and the pope and their fellow knights now see them as an enemy. I doubt that’ll change over the next few years, and it doesn’t necessarily mean things will get better, either. Even the knights that walk in faith get hungry and need to replace their worn-out equipment. If they got a hold of some great, eccentric merchant, they may be able to cover their living costs for the time being, but would you still be able to

call them the noble Knights of Saint Kruza after that?”

And that would lead to disbandment.

As a parting gift to his men, the commander brought them home to the kingdom while they still retained the structure of a knight's order, so that they would have a chance to be welcomed back as such by the people.

It was an attempt to divert the honor that their families had enjoyed all this time to the knights themselves right at the very end.

“Then does that mean Heir Hyland is stationed at the cathedral as a sort of welcoming party?”

Though she was a collateral relative, she was still royalty, so when Hyland appeared, the knights would most likely stand for her.

“I see the gears in your head are starting to turn a little quicker now. You're right. At least from the people's perspectives, they see it as treating the knights to hospitality if there's a member of the royal family with them at all times.”

There was something suggestive about her tone, and Col furrowed his brow. He knew he was not imagining things because it was abundantly clear how Myuri was looking at Eve inquisitively.

But Myuri was still munching on grapes in the meanwhile, so it seemed she got a bit distracted.

“Do you mean to say there is a hidden reason as to why the knights have arrived in the kingdom?”

Col tried to pluck a grape from Myuri's hand, but she fiercely denied him.

“That's what I think, but that might be because of my rotten personality. And I have plenty of grapes.”

“Oh, no, I do not want to eat them, particularly...”

Myuri stuck out her tongue and popped another one in her mouth.

“Which means they must have received some secret orders from the pope, then. But...it does not seem like this will lead to war.”

Col thought of the unlikely possibility that they might be messengers of

reconciliation, but that did not account for Rhodes's presence in all this.

Would those sent as messengers of reconciliation rush down a road, bearing a letter requesting aid?

"War comes in many forms. An easy example would be how merchants fight over territory." Eve, who had been gazing in enjoyment at Myuri's antics, leaned back in her chair as she spoke. "Let's say we have two opposing companies, and one wants to start making inroads into the other's sphere of influence, which is, for example, the fresh grape import industry."

Myuri must have thought it a captivating topic. She straightened herself in her seat and regarded Eve with interest.

"The two companies don't get along at all. Even if the company that wants to get into importing grapes raises the money for their importing rights, they'll be blocked, or paid no mind at all and won't be able to participate in the industry. This happens a lot. Associations and unions are specifically meant to provide aid in times like that, you know."

It was not uncommon to hear stories about newcomers being obstructed in such a way.

"In scuffles like that, it wouldn't be unusual for the company being blocked to visit the company getting in their way, fully intending to dole out a beatdown. That's settling things by force."

Myuri's eyes sparkled at the whiff of battle, and Col, as the concerned older brother of a young teenage girl, sighed.

"But that opens you up to big losses, too—that'd be their reputation in town. So what do you do then?" Eve clapped her hands and rubbed them together. "You say this to a small company under your patronage: Hey, go import some fresh grapes!"

"Um...?"

After being denied entry into the import industry, they would use another company to import in secret.

It was a simple solution; making a smaller company do it would mean the

profits would not be very significant.

“It does make me feel as though that would bring about a problem, however,” Col remarked.

“That is exactly the point,” Eve said, grinning. “When the small company imports the grapes, they’ll be immediately found out and denounced. That’s when the first company appears and says: What is it you are quarreling about? Oh, I see, to think a friendly company of ours would do such a thing. We are terribly sorry. Why don’t we have a little chat about imports so that this doesn’t happen again...See? Then finally, the other company will realize they’ve had the negotiation table forced on them. Even if they know the standard routine, they’ll start to think about what to do about the small company’s imports.”

The topic was the kind that would set Myuri’s tail whipping back and forth if it was out. The metaphor here was probably that the small company was the knights, and the two companies in opposition were the kingdom and the Church.

“So the knights are here to start a fight?” Myuri asked.

“The kingdom mobilized their forces during the last disturbance here in Rausbourne, remember?”

It seems this merchant had caught wind of the royal court’s circumstances. The sharp-eared Eve sighed as she replied.

“Yes. We borrowed some of your time to go out because of that,” Col said.

“Fire has already been set to the underbrush, and it’s the Church’s camp that’s burning. For them, when they are under heavy social scrutiny and already have people internally calling for reform, the ground beneath their feet is only going to crumble even further as more time passes. I bet it would be much easier on them if the whole commotion in Rausbourne turned out to be the spark that started a war. That’s why the king’s choice to wait was a clever one. Well, I guess it was the elderly king who sent his military forces to subdue the tax collectors in a panic, so it might be the crown prince who’s the smart one,” Eve said, sitting up straight, then improperly leaned over the table and plucked one of the few remaining grapes in the bunch Myuri held and popped it into her mouth.

Myuri was well-behaved enough not to complain, of course, but she turned to Col as though she wanted to tell him something. Perhaps she wanted him to say something.

“You have the whole world looking at them, so it won’t be easy for the Church to get the gears turning on a war, given there’s no big reason for them to start anyway. That said, the situation will only get worse for them at this rate, so they need to pull the kingdom into a spot of conflict. So they send their own army to take a look around and find something that works in their favor.”

“And those are the knights...”

“Exactly. The war with the pagans has just ended, and it doesn’t seem like they’ll have much time to shine. Not a bad choice for a last hurrah. The knights from Winfiel, at least, have the excuse of coming home to the kingdom. They’re being told to go back home and make some sparks.”

The inside of Col’s mouth went bitter because, even though he understood it logically, he did not want to comprehend it emotionally.

Eve sat at the opposite end of the table, her expression cool.

“Things would start out like this with the pope pulling the strings in the background. You making that face means a good handful of people in the kingdom would be willing to make concessions for the knights with that same face.”

Perhaps without Rhodes in the picture, Col would not have thought that possible.

But the boy and his letter of aid had been tossed out into terrible, winter-like conditions in such thin clothing. There were surely other trainees like him on the roads throughout the kingdom, muddled as they made their way to their destinations.

“Does Heir Hyland think the same?”

“She’s good to the bone, so even though she can’t possibly imagine a thoroughly rotten scheme, she probably thinks that they’ve been forcefully but partially ordered to do this from the pope. That’s probably why she’s put me here in her place.”

“Which means...?” Col, still not clear, asked, and Myuri spoke up.

“She’s a bad merchant. She was originally supporting the king’s enemy, remember?”

Col gulped in recollection. Indeed—Eve had been supporting Heir Klevend, who was second in line for the throne, and who would also not stop at internal strife to claim the throne for himself.

Which meant that Hyland must have wanted to leave her under a watchful eye all so that she would not take advantage of the chaos and start scheming with Heir Klevend, but Col thought it was a bit much to bring her into own manor. This would make it obvious and overt surveillance over Eve, and Col did not understand why Eve would willingly follow along.

All he could think of was that Hyland was so suspicious of Eve, that Eve determined it would be best to follow her request.

The king. The second prince. The Knights of Saint Kruza.

When he placed these three parties next to each other in his mind, he realized something.

“The enemy of my enemy is my ally?”

“The king wouldn’t want both of his enemies working together, so they need to keep a watch on the one who may play mediator between them.”

That also was a possibility as to why the knights came to Rausbourne in the first place.

“It’s a horribly mean accusation, but I had no choice but to obey since the royal family might genuinely suspect me.”

“I think you’re suspicious, too,” Myuri said as she popped the last grape into her mouth.

Eve frowned and gave a large sigh.

“You upended all the plans I had in the last ruckus. Next time I plot something, you’ll be the first ones I invite.”

There came the sound of a splitting grape.

“Well then, how about another plate of grapes, little lady?”

Eve smiled impishly, another way of her laying the groundwork for her plans, and Myuri responded with delight.

Of the Knights of Saint Kruza maintained by the Kingdom of Winfiel, thirty were formal knights, ten were knights-in-training, and twenty were pages who took care of various odds and ends for them.

Col was disappointed by how few of them there were, but Myuri, who had been telling him about them, glared at him.

“Listen, Brother, knights in the Knights of Saint Kruza have to win at least five jousting competitions hosted by titled nobility. Even just winning five makes you super strong. That’s one person with the strength of a thousand. That means thirty knights have the strength of three thousand regular soldiers!”

Myuri gave a fiery speech in their room at Hyland’s manor, but Col had to interject.

“If there are thirty men with a strength of a thousand, then that would be thirty thousand soldiers.”

“Wait, what?”

Col sighed as he watched her count her fingers.

Her wolf ears suddenly perked and she whipped her head up to look at him.

“That doesn’t matter! Let’s go see the knights! Pretty please?!”

She had been like this since the moment she woke up.

Though she had risen late, perhaps exhausted from their march on horseback, when she leaped out from under the covers, the first thing she mentioned was wanting to go see the knights.

“No.”

“Why?!”

“*Why?*” Col placed down his quill, which he had in his hand to work on his translation of the scripture, and explained what he already had before. “We are in a position that would very likely make us the Knights of Saint Kruza’s mortal

enemies. Have you forgotten what Rhodes said? There may be people outside keeping watch on us right now under secret orders. We must be careful, especially since we do not know what the knights' intentions are."

Myuri puffed out her cheeks so far that it almost changed the shape of her face, and her tail poofed out at the same time.

"No one's out there! The only ones watching us are Miss Eve's workers!"

Myuri refused to give up, so she went to ask Eve if it was all right to go, but the intelligent woman deftly avoided giving an answer.

"Why not decide on a design for the crest instead?" Col suggested, and Myuri turned away in a huff; the thought again crossed his mind that the design of a wolf turned away would be best.

As their morning passed, the guard that had stayed with Hyland at the cathedral came bearing a letter.

"For noon mass?"

"Yes. More precisely, they are wondering if the Twilight Cardinal might come in the middle of noon mass."

Myuri moved to answer in Col's place, but he raised a hand to stop her and asked, "But I would believe that the knights are not particularly fond of me."

"That is why your presence has been requested while mass is ongoing. All the knights attend prayer morning, noon, and night. It is during these times that you will be able to talk in secret without the others noticing anything."

Col understood somewhat, but something still struck him as strange.

"By talk, do you mean...with Heir Hyland?"

"No, with Commander Wintshire."

He was the one that led those from the Winfiel Kingdom.

"According to Heir Hyland, Sir Wintshire hopes you will lend him some of your wisdom."

Col did have a slight feeling that he might be accused of being a heretic, but if Hyland said so, then there must be good reason for it.

He looked at Eve, who sat with them, but she simply shrugged.

“Whether he’s plotting something or not, you should talk to him anyway. I’ll send one of my guards along with you, and I doubt things will get violent with this kid around.”

Eve poked Myuri on the head.

The guard who had brought the letter seemed to accept that the noble knights would not get rowdy with a girl present, but that was not exactly the case here. A band of thirty knights working together stood no chance against her.

But as Col looked down at Hyland’s letter, the image that came to mind was of Rhodes. It was hard to imagine the knights would send such a clumsy plea of help if the pope truly had ordered them under some plot.

Which meant it was possible they genuinely were asking for help, which would then mean that Col had an obligation to take their hands into his own.

“We shall go.” He stood from his chair and gave his answer.

The letter contained a pledge from the commander that he would not arrest Col, but Col still decided it would be best to keep himself disguised, so he dressed as a merchant before leaving the manor.

They would stand out terribly if they traveled in one of Eve’s carriages, so they went by foot instead.

Myuri’s steps were so light and bouncy at the prospect of meeting the knights she idolized that it almost seemed like she was floating.

Rausbourne was lively, as always, and they spotted people here and there performing and singing tales of knights, stalls selling wooden swords, and some artisans had even set up shop engraving knight coats of arms.

It was the people selling flowers that stood out most in the plaza in front of the cathedral. What Eve had said of the city girls wanting to give the knights wreaths of flowers was not an exaggeration—it was fact.

“Will you buy one?” Col tentatively asked Myuri, but she glared at him.

“I genuinely respect the knights, Brother.”

It was as though she was telling him not to compare her to the frivolous girls who would gift flowers to any knight.

It was a complicated age for a girl, so he obediently nodded.

They passed through the hustle and bustle of the stalls and made their way to the cathedral, where a milling crowd even greater than the last was waiting for them.

“...How shall we get in?”

Since the knights were also taking part in mass, the townsfolk were swarming the building. The procession went in as far as it possibly could, with the young assistant pastors and clergy-in-training hurriedly trying to keep the line in order.

“There is a side passage. Let us make our way there,” the guard Hyland had sent whispered in Col’s ear. The guard brought them around the side of the cathedral, where there was an iron door with a peephole.

“We have guests for Heir Hyland,” the escort stated, and from inside came the sound of a key turning, and the door opened.

“All those people are making it hot in here,” Myuri remarked.

They proceeded inside, went up a brief flight of stairs, and came to a corridor on the mezzanine level of the passageway that wrapped around the outside of the nave. There was a wall on the nave-side of the corridor, making it so that no one there could see who was using the hallway. It was perhaps a passage meant for the use of nobility and other high-standing individuals.

They could peer through the latticed windows that were placed at regular intervals on the wall and see just how crammed the nave was with people.

It was almost like a sea of people. How the heat from the crowd poured so thickly into the stone corridor, which was still chilled from winter, was palpable.

“Oh, knights,” Myuri said, pressing her face onto the window.

At the very front of the crowd of attendants was a group of people wearing deep crimson mantles. They all were above average height, and had broad shoulders and sturdy builds; they stood out for better or for worse.

Each of them wore flower wreaths on their heads, and flowers had been sewn

into their mantles.

They were all presently occupied, talking to the children who came up to them, but very peaceful looking.

“They’re so popular,” the young assistant priest that was guiding them informed them. “We rarely ever see the royal Knights of the Golden Sheep, but their ships do occasionally call at the Rausbourne port when someone is undergoing ship-steering training. The people do get excited when that happens, but we have only ever heard of the Knights of Saint Kruza in stories.”

Knights stood at the top, in a sense. And not only that, they traversed across the sea as representatives of the kingdom to train hard every day and serve God.

As one who had caught a glimpse of what lay behind the curtain, their brilliance even seemed a bit cruel to Col.

“This way.”

The assistant priest must have read his thoughts, since he resumed his duties as a simple guide and led them to the cathedral office while keeping them out of sight from others.

The cathedral was a long building; from the front entrance to about halfway through was the nave where regular people could enter freely, and the altar sat almost at the center. Everything beyond that point was where the clergy worked, and it even housed a chapel specifically for nobles who made large donations. There were also rooms for honored guests.

As they made their way further into the building it got suddenly quiet, despite how busy it was in the nave, and the transition felt strange enough.

As they waited in the room, they soon heard footsteps coming from the other side of the door, and Hyland appeared.

“I am so sorry to call you back here right when you’ve left for a relaxing trip.”

“Oh, please do not worry about it. But is it true...that he wishes to seek my counsel?”

Col would understand if he would be apprehended as the enemy.

When the thought crossed his mind, Hyland spoke up.

“I also considered the possibility that they may be plotting against us, but I would find it most regrettable if it turned out they were not and we did nothing for them.” She continued, “Officer Wintshire is asking for help so that he may keep his company alive.”

Col felt the same, and it struck him again how he had come to serve such a wonderful person.

CHAPTER FOUR



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The cathedral bells rang and noon service began. The sound of the bell and the warm sunlight streaming through the windows cut into the stone walls alone were a guarantee for a peaceful day.

Amid it all, among a small group gathered in the chapel meant for nobility within the cathedral, was an elderly knight dressed in ceremonial armor.

"I am pleased to meet you. I am Commander Claude Wintshire—the Saint Kruza Wintshire Company is under my command."

"I am Tote Col, traveling by Heir Hyland's call."

Since he was not receiving official support, Col did not say he was "serving" Hyland.

He also wanted to avoid any of the trouble spreading to her as much as possible if and when the knights deemed him an enemy.

"I have heard the rumors, but you are quite young."

Col did not sense any malice in his mild smile, at least, but he felt something restless behind him.

"If I may, Sir Wintshire," Hyland spoke up, a pitying tone to her voice. "This is Sir Col's younger sister, and she idolizes knights. She is an intelligent young woman who has contributed a considerable deal on this journey, so she will be joining us today."

Myuri looked at Hyland with wide eyes, and she then looked at Wintshire.

"Oh ho, this is truly an honor," the old knight said, flicked back his deep crimson mantle with a grand gesture, went down on one knee, and took Myuri's hand. "I am Claude Wintshire, knight of the Knights of Saint Kruza."

"O-oh...Ah...Um..."

Myuri's face went bright red, and she looked at Col with an expression that

suggested her ears and tail might pop out at any moment.

“This is my sister. Her name is Myuri.”

“Oh ho, and her name is beautiful as well.”

The old knight smiled at her, and Myuri only nodded, dazed.

Though she said she would never give a flower wreath to a knight, Col wondered if that was because she had lost her nerve and had been unable to bring herself to actually do it.

“Thank you very much, Sir Wintshire,” Hyland said, and Wintshire smiled at Myuri once more before standing.

Myuri gently brought the hand he had held to her chest, then came to stand behind Col, as though hiding her treasure away.

“First, I thank you for gathering here on my request,” Wintshire gave his thanks. “I believe you may have suspected I was plotting a wicked scheme to bring you harm.”

In this room were a total of three of Hyland’s guards and two guards dispatched by Eve. Out in the hallway, the escort that had brought Col and Myuri to the Brondel Abbey stood watch for surprise attacks.

But in contrast, Wintshire was alone.

“If I may inform you of the true situation, there are quite a number of my men who do not think fondly of you. Which is why I have used the one time I may be separated from them—mass.”

Col understood that from his encounter with Rhodes.

“We are not attempting to destroy the Church, nor are we intending to spread heretical beliefs. I hope you understand that.” Col had to bring this up, even though it might perhaps be a little late for it.

Wintshire nodded deeply.

“Money and the Church have long been the source of headaches. Campaign funds were necessary in order to wipe out the pagans and spread proper faith throughout the world. Faith and prayer alone does very little in the real world,

and though we have nothing to be ashamed of, we have no excuse for any of the clergy who use that money to indulge in gluttony and lust.” His powerful way of speaking seemed to have enough force to drive away the darkness alone. “I do possess a certain degree of understanding of what the kingdom is trying to accomplish.”

Hyland cast her eyes downward briefly—perhaps in a courteous gesture—accepting his remark.

“But there are many who do not think that way. They have deemed the kingdom as evil, as a stronghold of heretical faith. And we hail from the kingdom—we set sail for the island of Kruza as the crest of the golden sheep bade us farewell. Which means that others see us as having lost true faith.”

Wintshire refused to even touch on the fact that the very two who had a hand in creating such a massive commotion were right here.

“Our faith will not waver. We believe God understands that as well. But I am here because prayer will not affect reality. We cannot maintain the company as we are now.”

Wintshire’s speech was heartfelt, but Hyland replied with distress.

“I am currently approaching the king about reinstating the donations. However...I anticipate it will be rather difficult to continue giving you, the knights, donations.”

Wintshire nodded.

“I understand the state the kingdom is in as well. If it were to come to war, we would be standing on the front lines. We would wield weapons and shields purchased with the kingdom’s money and use them to fight against kingdom soldiers. There on the battlefield, we would face our old friends, our brothers, and even our fathers. And even if we were able to avoid the fighting...Well, that alone would present us with a different weighty decision. Our position would remain ambiguous.”

Would they remain at the pope’s side and fight against the kingdom, or would they be able to turn their swords against their master as citizens of the kingdom, or as those whose existence was preserved through kingdom

donations?

Of course, there may also be the option of siding with neither by God's will, but regardless, Wintshire was left in a tough position.

Everyone around them looked at them with scorn—*Who were they, exactly?*

"Then," Col spoke up, and everyone turned to look at him, "what is it that I can do?"

Frankly speaking, what the knights lacked was money.

That was one thing that was far beyond Col's means, and he wondered that if perhaps Wintshire should have summoned Eve instead.

"My apologies, I lost track of the conversation. Talks get long when one works as a knight," Wintshire said, clearing his throat. "Twilight Cardinal. You have a great deal of influence. I was hoping to use your influence so that we may continue to exist."

"Influence? Well, even if I did have a bit of influence, I...I am not sure how to put this, but I believe it may prove to be a hindrance to you..."

The name of the Twilight Cardinal had been set up as a symbol that was easy to understand, for the kingdom to oppose the Church.

In essence, it was nothing more than an enemy to the Knights of Saint Kruza.

"Ordinarily, that may be the case. However, we have been abandoned by many camps, if you would, and we are no longer needed."

There was nothing obsequious about his speech, but his clear-cut manner of speaking instead brought pain to the listener.

Wintshire looked at Col and smiled kindly. "Then what would happen if the Twilight Cardinal were to suddenly speak very highly of us? *Though we may be enemies, you have done exceedingly well*, or something of the sort."

The man looked just like a refined, faithful knight who beamed as he spoke. Col was starting to understand what Wintshire was trying to say, and a part of his heart started to stiffen.

"The pope is at a loss for what to do with you. Because the Church never

speaks of which so-and-sos famed in faith happen to appear. That is when you acknowledge us as an equal, or at least a worthy, opponent. What will the pope, the cardinals, and the others of high standing think then?"

Col inhaled, as though he was trying to forcibly fill his hardened heart with air.

"...That you are someone who could contend as an equal enemy."

"Precisely. For us, people who fight because it is our God-given mission, there would be no greater reason for living."

These were knights who did not know where their allegiances lie, who were seen as an enemy by all.

They would have value either as a group who stood up to the Twilight Cardinal, or as one that brought together the hearts of people attempting to distance themselves from the Church. It was a value that Wintshire and the knights would only gain by existing.

That was what he was trying to say.

Day in and day out they prayed, swung their swords, trained, and they would be the ones risking their lives on the front lines if war were to break out, and they were essentially attempting to preserve themselves by having who is essentially their enemy give them praise. They were not fighting their enemy, but currying favor.

Wintshire himself was most likely aware that what he was saying was horribly unfitting for someone in the position of a knight. That was evident from his tense, all-too-bright smile.

However, he had an obligation to lead his men and act in a way that would preserve their continued existence. He would not hesitate, even if he was dealing with the unfamiliar young man who had driven them into this predicament in the first place.

This was an experienced knight who would bear through any humiliation for his objective.

Col had to somehow withstand the urge to kneel before him.

"Of course, I also have the option to cut you down as the pope's blade right

here. But that would mean war with the kingdom, and from the word I have gathered of you in this cathedral, I do not believe that would not be the right course of action.”

It was hard to tell how much of that was flattery, but he likely genuinely did not want to go to war with the kingdom, his homeland.

“I believe...I have understood what you want to say. And the role you are asking of me.”

Wintshire nodded and said, still genially, “From your point of view, this is essentially a suggestion of deliberately strengthening your foe. I understand how strange it must sound. But I ask you to understand.” The man, who had been a knight since birth, gazed at Col. “We are the Winfiel Company of the Knights of Saint Kruza. We have played starring roles in many wars detailed in the knights’ epic. Please, do not allow a company with such an storied history come to an end.”

As Wintshire said that, the great bells of the cathedral began to ring.

He did not move to repeat what he said, despite the bell ringing over him, and he stared at Col as the sound continued to echo around them.

The knights’ journey was on the brink of finding an end.

They would cling even to their enemy in order to continue forth again.

“I await your response,” was all Wintshire said before thanking Hyland for arranging the gathering, and he quickly left the room.

Mass was over, and the other knights would soon return. If they suspected anything about the humiliating plea, they might even draw their weapons.

As all present remained still, Col turned his gaze to Hyland.

The kind royal placed her hand on his shoulder, the easygoing smile missing from her face.

“I think we need to report this plan to the king.”

Col’s head shot up at the unexpected statement and Hyland let go of his shoulder, turning to look at the Church crest that hung on the wall.

“The Knights of Saint Kruza are in a precarious situation, and they are losing confidence. Wintshire returned to the kingdom to give them hope again. There are people here who would bless them, after all.”

Eve had the same view.

But Hyland was not as honest and straightforward as Eve would suggest.

Hyland was looking at the reality surrounding the knights from an entirely different perspective.

“But in a way, one could also call this a protest of theirs. They are showing just how popular they are with the people.”

Showing who?

The king.

“If their company were to disband, the news would spread all over the kingdom and be met with a significant public response. I believe many would then start to doubt the decisions of the king and all those sided with him. But the biggest danger would not be the momentary effects of the news.” Hyland was looking at something greater. “For example, we cannot say that there will be another big pagan uprising or war with the heretics in the future. Without our own company when that happens, the kingdom would be the only country unable to dispatch their knights in the Knights of Saint Kruza, and we would be abandoned in a war of faith. Our name would vanish from the annals of world history. This turning point we are in now may very well hold sway over the royal family’s future.”

Even if the kingdom did go to war with the Church, they could not completely cut ties with them, just as it would be impossible to completely remove the Church itself from the country, nor did Col think that was the right choice.

All he had to imagine was a future king saying this to him, the next time the war with the pagans flared up again: *You are the impious ones that disbanded the knights all that time ago, no?*

“The halting of donations to the knights was originally put in place at the very beginning of the conflict to show the powerful nobles that we were serious about challenging the Church. The king must have honestly assumed that the

suspension would not last long...And that goes for the war itself as well.”

Three years had passed since the kingdom and Church began their struggle.

They must have planned to reach reconciliation rather quickly in the beginning.

“The king will surely adopt this plan in order to make sure some of the Winfiel Kingdom’s influence remains in the Knights of Saint Kruza. The problem is”—Hyland looked at Col—“that would mean making you lie.”

“I—” Col began, but no further words came out. Though he would not go as far as calling it a *lie*, it was still true that he could not shake the stench of deceit.

But if he were to accept Wintshire’s idea, then the favorable conditions created by the knights’ popularity with the people may indeed give them value in the pope’s eyes, just as planned.

And in reality, the one lying in this plan was not Col.

It was Wintshire himself.

“There is something on which I would like to ask your opinion, Heir Hyland.”

“What is it?”

Hyland was a member of the royal family, which made the difference between her and Col like heaven and earth.

He had no choice but to jump if she commanded him to do so, and if she asked him to move mountains, he had to at least try.

But she spoke to him as an equal.

And so he asked, “If this plan goes well, then will Sir Wintshire continue being a knight?”

Col’s hunch told him he would not.

Hyland pursed her lips.

Perhaps that was her answer.

The sound of the cathedral bells once again rang through the windows carved in the stone walls.

The whole would move forward at the cost of one.

Though that may be the right choice for a warrior, Col could not find the confidence for it.

“Please give me some time.”

Hyland nodded silently.

Though Wintshire had made an unbelievable request, he was still trying to save his troops.

And if his request went forward, then his knights would quietly obey his decisions because of the hierarchical nature of the organization, though many of them may feel a sense of unease about it. And since this would save his men, the majority would also keep quiet about their doubts.

But that did not mean they would not perceive it as deceit, and the truth would surely get out in the form of a rumor. That was because if one thought carefully about it for a moment, one would see just how unnatural it all seemed.

The majority of the people, however, would not sweat the details, and the crux of the issue was that this plan benefited both the kingdom and the pope. It would most certainly end up going well one way or another by benefiting both.

As Col thought about that, he easily imagined how they would deal with the stress that emerged in this room.

That old knight was going to take everything on his own shoulders.

“Can’t you do anything to help?” Myuri asked as they made their way back from the cathedral, plodding along.

Wintshire had treated her like a lady, and her face went red from it.

She had gotten to see knights she so idolized and also saw their reality. The noble knights, with faith in their hearts and sword in hand, were actually at the whim of the raw circumstances of reality and were nothing but people who were desperately trying to cling to it.

Their brilliant act was all but a brilliant sheen, paper armor that shriveled up under the world’s cold rain.

“Help who?”

Was it Wintshire, or his troops?

Myuri was gripping Col’s hand, and he squeezed it.

“Both.”

That was a selfish hope only a child could accept.

But it was indeed the result that everyone hoped for.

It would be easy to line up all the reasons why that was not possible, and they were not yet in a situation that called for last resorts.

Huskins had told him to take broad steps, because those beside him were watching his steps for him.

“We will think all we can.”

Myuri might have been expecting a more pessimistic answer.

She looked up, blinking her wide eyes in surprise.

“They have not done anything wrong. I am sure God has prepared a path for them.”

Most importantly, Wintshire would receive all the pressure at this rate, and the knights would continue under a falsehood—Col thoroughly doubted any of that was just.

He had been told the same thing when it came to his crest with Myuri.

Everyone has their own things they consider precious, and so they must not add lies or falsehoods.

That was especially true for something that would represent who they were.

The name of the Knights of Saint Kruza shaped the lives of Rhodes and Wintshire and everyone else who was a part of it.

“Let us save the knights.”

Myuri’s eyes gleamed, and she replied with enthusiasm.

What the knights lacked was not only a reason for being, but frankly, money. Them coming to Rausbourne was also a means to an end as they needed to ask

for food, clothing, and shelter for the time being from the cathedral, whose gates were now open.

With their living expenses covered for now, they might be able to find other paths to salvation that did not involve them relying on their own influence.

That meant there was one person in particular to whom they needed to speak.

“Demanding their gratitude won’t be very profitable,” Eve, who had been watching Hyland’s manor while she was away, replied curtly as she continued her work.

She was writing a letter to Ilenia proposing that she purchase wool from the Brondel Abbey.

Col stole a glance at it to see it was questioning Ilenia why she had not purchased such good-quality wool before. As he considered the reason being was her and Huskins’s bad relationship, he started to think that not doing so was a rather bad thing.

“The Brondel Abbey was in trouble long ago as well, remember? The merchants back then went out there to buy their assets, pretending to be good people lending a hand.”

“Yes.”

“That’s because they had their own assets to sell back to them, or because the privileges they had were also profitable to them. But the knights don’t have any of that. They’re only useful as tools.”

The merchant was a cold-blooded species, one that weighed one’s own heart against gold, and there was no ounce of mercy to her words.

“They’ll get donations if they recruit a philanthropist. Filthy rich merchants believe they can buy faith or salvation with gold, after all. But if that happens, then comes a problem that would be exactly the same if you were to help them.”

“About what the pretext is, yes?”

“There’s the pretext, yes, but it’s different if all they want is money to keep on

living.”

Rhodes had mentioned that poverty was seen as a lack of faith.

The kingdom would not care for them, and the pope did not trust them. And so they canvassed around, asking for money that will keep their company afloat. They collect funds, buy their bread, and polish their swords.

But what would happen after that?

“I told you they’re tools. The problem is that they’re tools that no one needs. Wintshire is outstanding in that sense. He has absolutely no hopes about who he and his men are. He is doing all he can to heighten their value as tools, and that’s it. It was almost noble how he asked for your help.”

Myuri glared daggers at Eve in response to her cool phrasing, but that changed nothing about Eve’s demeanor.

“But if what he said is true...,” Eve finished writing the letter and sprinkled sand across the writing to dry the ink, then took another sheet of paper from the umbrella girl. “Then that means we have hunting dogs wandering around without a leash. That’s the bigger problem.”

Eve had assumed that the pope was using Wintshire and his knights for a scheme.

That certainly brought trouble to mind, but it was still a problem if that were not the case.

“Are you talking about Heir Klevend?”

“Hyland put me here; she’s quite sensible. A merchant’s instincts lie in the buying and selling of tools.”

“Please don’t say it like that.”

Her tone was exaggerated, but when Col tried to stop her, Eve gave an even more exaggerated smile.

“A dog needs a master.”

“What?”

“All the knights are thinking about right now are being pampered by the

townsfolk. The warm wine that is praise is filling their cold, hardened hearts. But that elation isn't going to last forever. The constant coddling is only fun for the first few days. They will absolutely get tired of it, and that's when they'll wake up. That's when they'll once again realize their own reality, that the master whom they'd served all this time abandoned them, and they no longer have a reason to wield their swords. Don't take the emptiness lightly—that is a hole with unfathomable depths.”

Eve pointed her quill at Col, then to Myuri.

“If you were to get hit by a carriage and keel over and die, then what will that wolf do?”

She stared hard at Myuri.

When she asked the question, Col recalled being thrown into the frigid seas on a blustery winter night.

Myuri had leaped into the sea to follow him to death without a second thought.

“When the knights realize they have no reason to live, then what kind of things do you think they'll get up to? I don't dare try to picture it. Unnecessary chaos gets in the way of trade.”

The knights were a gathering of valiant warriors, reputed to have the strength of a thousand men each, and they would soon find themselves in a desperate situation.

Considering how popular they were with the people, there certainly would be some who would offer to feed them.

It was the beginning of a rebel army, one that was often remembered in tales of tragedy.

“That's why I'm thinking about deliberately selling them off to the second heir.”

Just as Col was about to voice his disapproval, it was Myuri that interjected.

“I kind of doubt that.”

When she said that, Eve raised her chin, urging her to continue.

“Isn’t the second prince a traitor to the royal family?”

“Sure, in the sense that he’s trying to seize the throne.”

“I don’t know if noble knights would take his side that easily. Killing their liege is a serious crime. The only time something like that is ever considered justice is when the king is being a tyrant.”

Myuri’s brain was full of war epics, but there was often truth to them.

“Good point. Have some grapes.”

Eve gave an order to the umbrella girl in the desert tongue. The girl nodded, smiled at Myuri, then left the room.

“It doesn’t adhere to nature. That’s why I’ll have to persuade them.”

“You mean there’s a possibility that it would adhere to nature?”

“If you put a key and a lock inside a box and shake the box around, it’s rather unlikely that the key will unlock anything, but it is possible if you put everything in place.”

The umbrella girl brought over a bowl piled high with green grapes.

Eve reached out to it and said, “I told you I’d invite you in on my next scheme. How about it?”

Myuri had reached out to take a grape, but she paused.

Eve was a merchant, through and through.

“Myuri.” Col said her name, and she produced her wolf ears and tail in an almost theatrical fashion, twitching them back and forth. She then stuck out her hand and grabbed all the grapes she could from the bunch.

“Anyway, I’ll take what we’ve talked about for now.”

Myuri opened her mouth wide to bite into the grape, like she was showing off her pointed canines.

“I almost want you to work for me.”

Eve smiled gleefully.

“I’m not going to act on my own if I don’t secure your approval. I can’t stand

the thought of you ruining my plans again.”

Eve was versed in fighting in the shadows. But now that Hyland had found her and placed her in the light, she thought that making the wrong moves would only bring her losses.

“That said, I don’t think you have many options,” said the merchant, who dealt in gold more valuable than human life every day, and waved her quill.

She was telling them they were interrupting her work.

Myuri took one final handful of grapes from the bunch before leaving the room.

Col and Myuri returned to their room. Myuri lay on the bed, drawing crests, and Col sat at the desk to stare blankly out the window.

The puppy they had left in the mess hall while they were visiting the Brondel Abbey was overjoyed to see Myuri again, but Myuri herself treated it coolly.

Her crest design had also turned out to be half-hearted and vague.

“I suppose this means that Miss Eve knows something.”

There was that metaphor of the key and the lock.

Eve was aware of pretext that clicked everything together.

“Knights of justice would never work with evil.”

Col looked to Myuri and saw that she had drawn a clumsy-looking knight on her wax board.

“She said they would need persuading.”

Myuri huffed in discontent and poked the puppy with her heel, who was playing with her silver tail.

“But I am impressed that she was considering what would happen after the knights start feeling emptiness from all the praise.”

That would mean reading into their future moves, but more importantly, Eve typically saw things in a cold way. Col doubted there was anyone else out there who was most suited to the phrase *from dust to dust, from ashes to ashes*.

“Do you think,” Myuri began. Still lying on the bed, she placed down her pen and wrapped her arms tightly around the pillow she had sandwiched between her chest and the bed. “The knights would still be happy working with the bad prince?”

Col hesitated answering right away, but an impertinent answer would certainly upset her.

“I think that depends on how firmly they believe in their cause.”

Eve had said that a knight order is a tool.

“If the pope is pulling the strings behind the scenes and secretly working with the second heir, then I feel Sir Wintshire may have been more at ease, and in a way, that might be closer to what he would want as a knight.”

He would have to be broad-minded enough to attack the kingdom, who was the Church’s enemy. He would most certainly have come up with an excuse to accomplish that. They were all knights, after all. They would happily crawl in the mud if their master commanded it.

But if they did not have the pope’s backing, and they were to work with the second prince simply to keep themselves afloat, then that put the situation in an entirely different light.

Even if they were doing the exact same thing, the nature of the poison would change and hurt the one doing the deed.

Fame and results.

People find pain if a thing is not accompanied by one or the other.

“Which means that Miss Eve believes that she can prepare a cause for them.”

“I can’t imagine. We don’t even know what kind of evil the king is,” Myuri said, sulking. She was correct.

The king was not perfect, of course, but he was not misgoverning so badly that the people were angry enough to want him strung up. The goal of this fight with the Church was the abolition of unfair taxes as well, so he had steady support from his people. It was almost impossible to imagine the knights would be offended over that, and instead side with the second prince believing it to be

more just.

As Col sat in his chair and sighed, a thought came to him.

“That must mean those sided with the second prince must believe in something.”

“Huh?”

Myuri rolled over onto her back, grabbed the puppy that was playfully toying with her tail, lifted it up into the air, and looked at him.

“Aren’t they just the same as that evil fox?”

“Do you mean the tremendous compensation for when he successfully takes the throne?”

Eve was most certainly supporting the second prince for the privileges and other commercial compensation.

“Or maybe he’s just siding with other nobles who hate the king.”

“So...she’s taking advantage of the situation to help him, then.”

That felt too simple to him. The second prince was crossing a precarious bridge where it was hard to tell when he may be put on the gallows for inciting a rebellion, but it was most certainly more dangerous for nobles. That was still true, even though talk of usurping was still not much more than a rumor, and there was no clear evidence to show plainly that was what he was after.

It still made no sense to Col, and Myuri’s eyes swam around the room as she thought.

She brought the puppy down to her chest, and it started licking her chin.

“...Since that calculating fox is on their side, that means they have a good chance of winning.”

Myuri grabbed the puppy by the scruff of its neck as it tried to shove its nose into her mouth.

“Do they have a chance of winning?”

It was a very fundamental question, and she immediately answered herself.

“They must do, I’m sure. I mean, if they add the knights to the mix, then they’ll have an even bigger chance of winning.”

The puppy rolled off Myuri as she sat up.

The puppy, mistaking her action as one of play, bit at her wrist, tail wagging.

“Brother?”

Myuri grabbed the puppy by the neck and pulled it up to her face and growled at it, then continued.

“Didn’t God say, *know thine enemy and you shalt win all your battles?*”

“...I doubt God ever said something so violent.”

There was some truth to it, though.

“I actually think the fox is going to guess what we’re planning on doing and then push us in that direction, and that annoys me.”

Myuri placed the puppy on the bed, and it lay down beside her, its tail wagging as it always was.

“Will you be watching our back?”

It was entirely possible that this also was part of Eve’s plans, which meant that they had to be extremely wary of their surroundings at all times.

When Col said that, Myuri grinned and drew her legs in to sit cross-legged.

“I’m making sure you don’t step on any stray dog’s tails.”

Though he smiled wryly at her phrasing, he still decided this was a good time to take the first step.

He stood from his chair, and she did the same.

When they told Eve they would be going out, it was hard to tell if that pleased her, but she did not ask where they were going.

“I can tell if someone’s following us, though.”

Myuri was just as skilled as a professional when it came to hunting in the forest. She could even circle around and cut off a deer that was minding its tail.

That alone was enough to bring Col comfort, but she boasted a formidable

strength that was her wolf's blood.

"The city strays are on my side."

Befriending the animals that wandered the city was an old trick of nonhumans that Myuri learned from Ilenia the sheep. Eve could not buy the strays, so the advantage was on their side.

"What about now?"

"None. Either because they found us out, or they already know where we're going."

Both were likely.

Col and Myuri headed to a run-down building in a quiet cluster of houses at the end of one of Rausbourne's mazelike alleys.

"Chiiickeen!" Myuri called, and a bird perched atop the roof chirped, then hopped into a gap between the roofs. Col was poking Myuri's head when the peeping window on the door angrily slid open.

"Go to the market if you want a treat, dog."

"Grrr!"

Their conversation would make one wonder if they were actually close friends, but when it was finished, the peeping window slid shut, and the door swung open after the lock was undone.

"Good news or bad news?"

"That is what we would like to confirm."

Sharon huffed and jerked her chin aside, telling them to come in.

The orphanage that Sharon and Clark maintained was filled with the distinct scent of children, one that smelled somewhat like spilled milk. But the reason it was empty inside was because Clark and the children were out working.

"We get load after load of wool at this time of year. Every company needs hands for spinning the wool, so this is when the kids have a chance to make money."

One who does not work shall not eat. This was not the home of ample

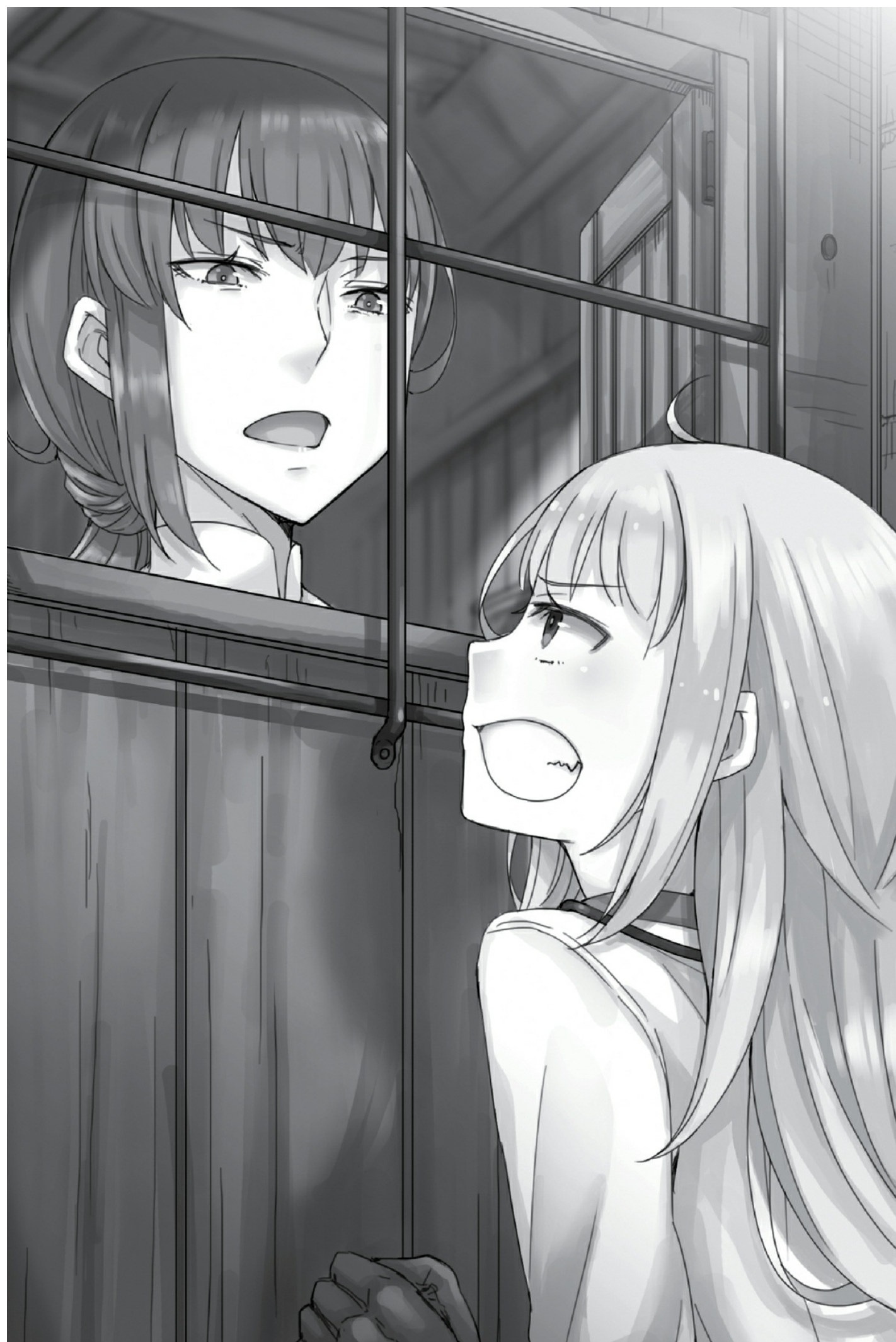
donations.

“So? Is this about the Knights of Saint Kruza?”

“Fundamentally, yes.” Sharon furrowed her brow when Col broached the subject. “We would like to ask about the second heir.”

Sharon seemed a bit confused as to why they wanted to know about that, so they told her about Eve and the proposal Wintshire offered back in the cathedral.

“Miss Sharon, when you were in charge of the tax collection association, it was the second heir that issued the tax collection permits that served as your justification to act, correct?”



“Yeah. But it’s not like I know the guy.”

“Really?” Myuri asked, poking at a deformed doll made of wool that had been crafted by one of the children.

“Why would I ever meet him? He’s not the kind of guy you can just walk up to. Not even for that blondie of yours.”

“Oh, okay. I mean, we’d get a lot of important people visiting our baths at home all the time, so,” Myuri said with a snobby, composed look, and Sharon turned a dubious eye on her.

“We do not mind any rumors you may have heard of him, though.” Col grabbed Myuri by the scruff of her neck, who looked smug at having dealt a solid blow to Sharon, before asking his question. “About his character or anything.”

“His character? I’ve only got rumors at best.”

“We do not know anything about that, either. We are perplexed by Miss Eve’s notion that the Knights of Saint Kruza may be working with the second heir, you see.”

Sharon narrowed her eyes in displeasure, then looked off into space as though sighting a distant prey.

“Did the knights come here under the pope’s orders?” she asked

If they were working together, then that was the first possibility that came to mind.

“The impression I had when we met during noon mass was that the pope is not involved at all, for better or for worse.”

Though Col did not outright say they had been abandoned, Sharon seemed to comprehend that.

“That would mean the knights would be cooperating with him voluntarily.” She seemed suspicious of that. “The second prince and the rest of them are insurrectionists who stamp on the principles of master and servant from the perspective of the knights. I highly doubt they’d work together.”

“So you think the same.”

Sharon shrugged.

“So that’s why you’re looking into the second heir, huh. To see where it all connects.”

“You don’t know anything, then, chicken?”

Myuri sounded disappointed, and Sharon’s mouth twisted in a way that made it look like she was about to click her tongue.

But in the end she sighed and drew up her shoulders, as though deciding it was stupid to keep entertaining the farce.

“Even the kids here know about the rumors and anecdotes. He is famous, after all. The impression I get from these rumors tells me that he’s not the kind of guy that the knights would want to work with.”

“I do not mind stories like that, either.”

Sharon folded her arms in front of her chest and said dryly, “He’s always been known for his debauchery.”

From what little they had heard from Hyland, he sounded much like a speculator—a faithless, unreliable character.

“What is true is that he’s gone on a spree with the kids of his noble henchmen. I spotted them around here and there when I was gathering up the other tax collectors. They had chefs carrying a big boat made out of bread, and drank like fish as they paraded around. They were calling it a voyage on a sea of alcohol.”

Col did not quite understand it all, but what he did understand was that they were doing outrageous things.

Myuri, who loved the cheer that came with festivals, sat next to him, eyes sparkling.

“But they’re not like other degenerate nobles you often hear about; they don’t abuse people, and the people don’t ostracize or hate them, either.”

“Is that so?”

A noble who did not work and went on boisterous merrymaking sprees sounded like enough to earn the people's antipathy.

"I guess people like how they party...When I saw them, they ended by bringing the whole bread boat to an almshouse and stood shoulder-to-shoulder celebrating with people who had nothing left to look forward to in life, people who'd given up. You know what I mean by that, right?"

It was hard to call the act one of purely high morals, but it did mean that they were openhearted people who were good at the core.

"They also like to tease the Church. I've heard that they'll surround a church with stone furnaces and start roasting lamb early in the morning to smoke them out. It sounds like something they'd do."

Myuri had her ears and tail out, enjoying the story, and Sharon seemed to like that when she saw her.

"I remember that the whole lamb-roasting happened because the Church was reluctant to give charity to the poor. From most of what I've heard, the prince was always on someone's side."

"The sheep is always with the people...is that what you mean?"

"That's how you'd end those stories, yeah. So because of that, people excuse his debauchery not because he's a royal—it's because he always takes the people's side. I hear that the lamb roasting story ended with them apologizing for what they did and then sending the Church lamb sausage."

Col wondered if that was a suitable apology, but Sharon gleefully continued.

"But the intestines were just stuffed full of useless offal, and there was even some soap in there. It was to tell them that it was fitting for a scheming bunch of people like them, especially since they didn't stop eating meat. It's a classic story that the greedy priests were literally frothing at the mouth. Once you know about how arrogant the Church is, the story makes you feel really good."

Myuri was clutching her stomach in laughter.

Col, however, was starting to get a clearer view of the second prince's personality.

He was a nonconformist, a problem child who was naturally filled to the brim with a rebellious spirit in the face of authority.

“Then those who have taken the second heir’s side must be charmed by that sort of personality.”

Stories that denounced the snobbish and powerful were always popular with the masses.

They would support the second prince’s bid for the throne, riding on his energy that was essentially that of a hero in a type of comedy.

When that thought occurred to Col, he was immediately beset by a terrible sense of unease.

Would anyone really lend a hand in something so bloody as a usurpation for such simple reasons?

If it failed, then the fate awaiting all these people was a beheading. It was too high a price to pay for what amounted to just a prank.

“The reason it sounds so plausible that he’s aiming for the throne lies in the cause of his parties; it’s not the result of them.”

“...What?”

The second prince laughed in the face of authority, so of course he would challenge the king, the greatest authority in the land.

It sounded logically possible, but something still did not quite add up.

The first reason was that Col was unsure if anyone could plot treason so casually.

The other reason was what Myuri had mentioned back in the manor.

There was no justice there.

“Most of the people following Heir Klevend are lesser nobles and noble children with nowhere else to go,” Sharon said, taking the unsightly doll made by one of the children in her hand.

A rare, gentle smile crossed her face; perhaps she was thinking of the child who had made it.

“You know about the first son inheritance systems the nobles have, right? Younger sons that won’t be taking over the family estate are sent away from home with a bit of pocket change, unless they’re a part of a real merciful family. Some of them have talent for business, and some master academics to become public servants, but most of them wander the world with nowhere to go. People call Heir Klevend the chief of the malcontents. He’s the king of the sport of dispiriting all the people who arrogantly rest on their laurels. They treat him like nothing more than a backup for his older brother, the next in line for the throne, after all. I heard for a time that they were going to send him off to be a knight so that...he would...stop...”

The rest of Sharon’s sentence never made it out of her mouth.

Col and Myuri, too, stared at Sharon wide-eyed.

“The knights are the same,” Col remarked.

Sharon’s half-open mouth shut when he said this.

“People who become knights were no longer needed by their families, and saw a path with the sword.”

“Do you mean that’s where things connect?”

This degenerate prince laughed in the face of ceremony and authority, and mercilessly disparaged them.

The noble knights lived by ceremony and faith, keeping justice locked inside their armor.

Though they were on opposite ends of the spectrum, they came from the same circumstances; it was likely that the only thing that made them different was that they had taken different paths.

“I’m pretty sure I’ve heard that one of the reasons the king and the oldest prince don’t take the high hand with the second heir’s debauchery is because they feel guilty,” Sharon said briefly. “They protect their family fortunes by chasing out their younger brothers, like how a bird would drop small and weak chicks from the nest. You often hear that wishing their siblings grow up living impactful lives is just a selfish way for the powerful to feel like they’ve redeemed themselves.”

The other tax collectors who had followed Sharon had been abandoned as illegitimate children of the clergy.

The knights were people who had been chased from their families because they were not eligible to take over their households, and just as they had found a place of their own as knights, they were about to lose it again. That is when the second heir would reach out to them.

Why don't we give all those people who get the easy life by excluding us a good scare?

"If they work with the second heir, then they'll be an antagonistic force against the king," Sharon murmured, pulling Col out of his dark thoughts. "From the pope's perspective, then the knights would've gotten hold of precious firepower to fight against the king. It's a good enough possibility that he might change how he sees the knights from the kingdom."

Eve had called the knights tools.

Unneeded tools, tools without use.

"I feel like there is a chance that the knights might cling to that hope. Your suggestion is way better than that in my opinion, though. The best parts of a play I will look on with a smile, but this gives me more energy to smile."

Wintshire must have thought along the lines of the second heir and proposed the previous idea.

By working with the second heir, then there would be glimmers of a full-out war in the future. Just as the old knight had mentioned in their meeting in the cathedral, not only were they at the right hand of the pope and protectors of faith, they were also people of the Winfiel Kingdom.

Wintshire said he would have to turn his sword on the people of his homeland, but he may have been genuinely apprehensive about that possibility. After all, the knights hid dark things in the deepest parts of their hearts in regard to the Winfiel Kingdom.

They had been ejected from their homes because they were unnecessary for the succession of their families, and their donations had been halted because they did not line up with the country's politics. Not only that, it was the very

conflict between the kingdom and the Church that made everyone around them doubt the sincerity of their faith.

When they drew their swords against their homeland, the oil of hatred would most certainly make their swords slide better.

But they were knights precisely because they wielded their swords in the name of faith, so they were no longer knights if they were wielding them in the name of hatred.

That was clear seeing the dark flames that burned in Myuri's eyes when she talked about the Moon-Hunting Bear.

She was essentially a different person at that point, and it was hard to watch someone so precious to him have her eyes turn that color.

It was preferable that their idea to draw out the Twilight Cardinal turned out to be nothing more than a farce.

"These people never had a place of their own, something everyone else took for granted. Or maybe they finally got one for themselves, only for it to be under threat now."

Sharon, who was creating a home for children who had nowhere to go, took a deep sigh, her arms folded.

"To be honest, I wish these Knights of Saint Kruza would just leave Rausbourne. If they start stirring up unnecessary chaos in the country, then it'll be harder to keep our monastery, and there'll be even more unfortunate kids if a war breaks out. But..." The eagle avatar looked like an unfeeling, empty hunter. She placed the ungainly doll back on the shelf. "I also understand the logic of the people eliminating the weak. I can hear it in my head: *There's nothing we can do, please understand.*"

The world was unfair; it was not made to be kind to all. The god that was supposed to have built the scales of equality for them was nowhere to be seen, so they had to manufacture one on their own, but that would still put the more powerful at an advantage.

There was the second prince, who teased the Church in the company of noble children who had nowhere to go and had boats made of bread and sent them

to poorhouses, and there were the knights, who despite not being able to inherit their family fortunes, spent all their time and tireless zeal on their faith and training.

They were total opposites, but their point in common was that they had fallen from the scales entirely due to their order of birth.

If they were to come together, then it would be for the worst reasons.

“Brother.” Myuri pulled on Col’s sleeve, and he exhaled the breath he had been holding.

From deep within Sharon’s orphanage came a baby’s cries.

Sharon looked in that direction, then back at Col.

“I can’t wait to see you publicly debating the knights.”

Wintshire had asked Col to praise them despite being enemies.

A public debate of preestablished harmony was foolish, but Col could imagine the results. Most knights might not like the idea of currying favor with the enemy, but there was no doubt that it would be an amicable interaction. More importantly, even if it created a shameful chagrin in their eyes, it would not light the flames of hatred. The knights would remain knights. It would be most certainly preferable to their connection with the second heir.

“All right, sorry, but the kid’s woken up now.”

“...That’s okay. Please tell Clark we said hello.”

Sharon shrugged and briskly walked off.

The private orphanage smelled uniquely of children, much like spilled milk.

How had Rhodes lived his life after he had been chased from his home?

The sudden question crossed Col’s mind.

Myuri was quiet on the way back.

There were only two paths her beloved knights could take.

There was the disgraceful choice, and there was the gloomy choice. Col hoped they did not choose the track that led to the second heir, especially because

that was most certainly a pretense for war.

Neither choice was perfect, but he knew which choice would spell failure.

“Myuri.”

Col called to her; she typically walked beside him, but she now outpaced him by a few steps. She stopped in her tracks, whirled around on the flagstone path to look at him.

“I believe we should take up the proposal we received in the chapel.”

Col caught up with her and gently placed his hand on her back, and they started off again, walking together.

“I am certain it will be a difficult choice for Sir Wintshire, but it will preserve his company.”

He would be praising the knights with the king’s confirmation, so it would be much easier to give the knights money as part of the king’s good graces. An upstanding person deserved praise, enemy or not. The knights would then save face, earn food to last them for a while, and they would not be surrendering to the kingdom.

Once the pope knew how the knights contended with the detestable Twilight Cardinal as equals and how tremendously popular they were with the people of the Winfiel Kingdom, his opinion of them as a bastion that could destabilize the kingdom’s footing would most certainly heighten.

There would of course be those who would see the convenient outcomes as contrived deception, and Col could see the truth getting out in the form of rumors. But the old knight would take on all the discord on his own. The one at fault was Col himself, the one who made the easy decision.

And thus, the company would continue to exist.

It was a realistic end to things.

“It might be a sad choice for you, though.”

“No, not at all,” she said, and lifted her head, offering him a brave smile so as not to worry him, but Col saw right through her.

“I am going to do all in my power to play the enemy of the Knights of Saint Kruza,” Col said, and Myuri was shocked. “You compliment me quite a bit, but I am going to let the people know that the knights are no less equally matched.”

Myuri held Col in very high esteem, so she might surely find relief from her pain by showing her beloved knights they were worthy of the same respect.

Because her logic said the knights were just as amazing as he was.

Col gripped her shoulders, hoping to keep her mood up, but she gave a slight shrug and batted his hands away.

“Brother?”

“Ah, yes?”

“I just adore you. I haven’t complimented you in any way in particular, though.”

“What?”

“It’s Blondie and the other townspeople I don’t know who always compliment you.”

“...”

As Col wordlessly searched his memory, he had a feeling that she might be right.

He immediately grew embarrassed by his overconfidence.

Just when he thought it was a good opportunity for him to make great strides, he ended up stumbling just like this. But someone was there to grab his arm—and it was none other than Myuri.

“But I know what it is that you’ve settled on, Brother.”

There was a soft smile on her face, which was entirely different from when she smiled in amusement.

Myuri tugged on Col’s arm, breaking his composure, and she stood on her toes to kiss him on the cheek.

“That’s what I love most about you.”

Col found himself abashed that she had managed to take him by surprise twice in a row, but he told himself that at least the first time was his own doing.

That said, he did not mind as long as his feelings had managed to reach her.

He sighed, remnants of all sorts of thoughts and worries exiting his body, and he breathed in the new spring air.

“Now that we have made our decision, let us go, quickly. Word of the knights’ arrival must have reached the second prince’s camp by now. We must settle this before they arrive with reprehensible plottings. We must not let Sir Wintshire’s decision go to waste.”

Myuri’s red eyes widened and she bared her fangs.

“Okay!”

She hugged his arm tight enough to stop the blood flowing through it, and as they started to walk, she said, “Heh-heh. You acting? I’m kind of worried I might start laughing.”

“...”

Col gave her a frown, and she responded with an impish grin.

He was astounded at how wicked of a wolf she was, but he was still relieved that she got some of her energy back.

In the end, it seemed that Eve did not, indeed, send anyone to talk to them.

When they returned to the manor, Myuri announced her hunch frankly to the older woman, who wore a rather exasperated look.

“You think I’m constantly scheming?”

“You’re not?”

At that moment, Eve’s hand snapped out to pull the grape basket toward herself, and it made her seem surprisingly childish.

“The situation will not definitively change very much with the knight’s attaching themselves to the second prince. That’s why I’m just carrying on with a more secure trade.”

“What sort?”

As the short comedy between Myuri and Eve played out—Myuri leaning over the table to reach for the grape basket in Eve’s arms, and Eve pushing the girl back—the umbrella girl smiled and brought over a new basket.

“After talking to you two, I immediately sent word to Yagine in the cathedral. I got his promise that I would be procuring the goods the knights would need and accepting and exchanging the any donations they’d get once your farce was over. The king might offer money to the knights in one way or another, too, so we most definitely will be relying on that.”

Eve was always one step ahead, and she always worked fast.

As Col breathed a sigh of admiration, Myuri, now with her own basket, popped a grape into her mouth.

“So this is just one part of the share, then.”

“It’s not one part. This is the whole share.”

“You’re stingy!”

Col smiled dryly at their interaction—they acted like sisters distant in age—when Eve suddenly spoke up.

“Ah, right. Let me just say this for your own good.”

“What is it?” Col asked in turn, and he spotted a wicked glint in Eve’s eyes.

“Say you acknowledge them as your enemy. That’s when the people will see the knights.”

“...All right.”

“Don’t think that’ll be the end of things.”

His mind blanked for a few moments.

“...What?”

“It means they might take both grape baskets!”

Myuri reached out over the table in an attempt to snatch Eve’s basket.

But Eve lightly brushed her away.

“Both? What do you mean?”

“It means when you acknowledge the knights as the ones you’re up against, then they might use that momentum to go ahead and start working with the bad prince. C’mon, think!” Myuri exclaimed.

“The greater the prestige, the greater the bargain,” Eve added.

Myuri’s ears and tail popped out in the middle of their interaction, having been treated so lightly, and she lay stomach-down on the table in vexation. The umbrella girl laughed and laughed as she patted Myuri’s head.

“Well, if you make a solid plan ahead of time, I doubt there will be any problems, though.”

Eve popped a grape of victory into her mouth.

“For better or for worse, the knights are a simple bunch. Show them the road to victory, and they’ll keep their eyes and feet on the path.”

She talked about them like they were cattle, but it made some sense.

A good part of the knights’ courage was owed to their simple honesty.

“It’d be a shame if they were to die off,” Eve said, leaning back in her chair. “I’d say I’m fond of war epics, too.”

The symbol of the knights was of crossed swords before the crest of the church.

No matter what Eve said, her heart was still of that of the Winfiel Kingdom.

“I will do what I can, but...”

“Hmm?”

Eve turned to look at Col, and he continued.

“But do not get too greedy for unfair profits.”

Eve’s shoulders shook as she laughed, having been caught on the wrong foot.

Communicating via letter over important matters was unreliable, so Col contacted Hyland through the soldiers stationed at the manor.

And so a reply came quickly, which was that since the knights were not present in the cathedral, they would be able to meet right away. The knights

were apparently officially touring the district in the city where swordsmiths and artisan workshops were concentrated since they would be participating in the festival for the patron saint of the swordsmiths' guild and blacksmiths' association.

"Aww, I wanna go!"

Myuri, who had heard from one of the manor's boy servants that there would also be sword demonstrations, immediately threw a fit, but Col of course ignored her. As he pulled the grumbling girl out to town, he had a feeling somehow that the crowd was flowing in one single direction. Or perhaps it was because Myuri kept looking in that direction, where the artisans' quarters were.

"Eeeveryone's going to the festival," she said; there was a strong flavor of sarcasm to her statement.

And as they arrived at the cathedral, Col was bewildered by the fact that there was a constant crowd there, though it was not as packed as it was during noon mass. He reckoned things were only going to get worse in the hours to come, since people finishing work would then be joining for evening mass.

The thought crossed his mind, so he asked Hyland about it when they reunited, and Hyland only shrugged.

"More and more people have been coming, even before the knights arrived. It seems people from neighboring towns are going out of their way to come for a visit. I think it's less that the knights are here, and rather because most chapels and churches in cities across the kingdom are still closed."

If one calculated how many days had passed since the recent uproar in Rausbourne, now would be about the time when those starved for faith in nearby settlements would have finally arrived after hearing word of the incident and taking the time to prepare for a trip.

"It would be nice if other churches in other cities would open their doors, though."

"The pope certainly seems terrified of that possibility, but what would you say is the reality of the situation?" Col asked.

The king and his advisers judged that time was on the kingdom's side.

“It is possible that...it may have been the last straw on the camel’s back somewhere, but we’ve received no further news, as of yet. The only churches that have opened up so far are in the cities you’ve passed through. Do you understand why you get so much attention now?” Her question was teasing. “And if things develop too far, then that alone would be enough for the Church to solidify their attitude. It would be nice if we could find a way to reopen religious services here in the kingdom while also making sure not to irritate the Church too much.”

Three years was much too long.

People were carrying out baptisms for newborns on their own, regional elders were messily reading aloud wedding vows, and the people were offering their prayers as they interred their dead through fuzzy memory and tears.

All in the meanwhile, with church doors closed and revenue cut off, the clergy either eked out a living on the stashes of assets, or crossed over to the mainland in search of benefices.

The test of patience was like a siege—neither side was getting any happiness out of this.

“And I reckon the truth for many of these churches is that the inside smells much too rotten to even open the doors. It’s lamentable, really.”

Even the Brondel Abbey, which Col and Myuri had visited not too long ago, was distant from a wholesome, faithful lifestyle. Col believed that it was the monks themselves that doubted him and Myuri more than Huskins did.

Their gates were surely kept closed not just because it was the pope’s orders, but because they were likely hiding something that would cast suspicion on them. They did indeed end up having their assets sold off when their bad business practices caught the attention of others once.

That said, it was clear that if the king were to directly reach out to the closed churches, it would certainly stir the pope’s anger. It would prompt an even more intense response than the tax collection permits issued by the second prince.

Col thought it would be nice if the Church could purify itself, but something

suddenly tugged on his mind.

As he thought of what that might be, Hyland spoke.

“But at the same time, making the pope’s blade shine would be a dangerous decision in a way.” Hyland sighed. “No, let’s keep this positive.” She smiled. “It really helped that you made the decision here.”

“Oh, of course,” Col responded lightly, and as he side-eyed the thought that came across his mind, he added, “Taking into consideration the possibility of the second heir and the knights working together, this plan has considerably less harmful side effects.”

“We couldn’t talk about that in front of Wintshire, but...I bet you were surprised when you saw Eve in the manor, weren’t you?”

There was a hint of guilt in Hyland’s smile, and Col smiled in return.

“Miss Eve seemed rather vexed at the suggestion that we suspected her of scheming, but I believe that was the right decision.”

“By the way, is she really not conspiring for the second heir and the knights to work together?”

“She said she spoke with Archbishop Yagine to secure a profit that aligned with our plan. She is hoping to secure an allowance for the goods the knights might need in the future, as well as money changing practices for the donations they might receive.”

A mixed expression crossed Hyland’s face—one that was partially surprised, partially relieved.

“I guess she’s fine with anything, so long as it lines her pockets.”

“She is reliable in that sense.”

Hyland shook her head, as though telling him she was having a hard time understanding.

“But we never know when and where we might run into interference. I want to proceed with talks quickly.”

This was in regard to name rather than reality. They would need to bulk up

the truth while the townsfolk were still enamored with the knights, and before the knights were distracted by superfluous issues.

“The problem is that Wintshire always has someone with him. He has social functions all day, starting first thing in the morning tomorrow, so it is terribly difficult to arrange things to happen behind-the-scenes.”

“What about at night?” Myuri asked, and Hyland took on a tired expression.

“I took the knights lightly—they are extremely skilled. There’s always a watchman with him all night. I want to praise the Knights of Saint Kruza for living up to their name, but it’s causing me quite a bit of trouble right now.”

Myuri was purely and innocently delighted to hear how amazing the knights were.

“And he has a guard right next to him during the day as well.”

“They’re being so cautious...Maybe the pope really is sending assassins?”

Myuri was drawn in by the sense of adventure in the situation, but Hyland gave a smile that was almost dry.

“That might be what they have in mind. But if the pope is indeed going to do such a thing in the kingdom, of all places, then I doubt the knights would have been able to set sail and leave the island in the first place. And he could have captured them while they were still at sea, too.”

“Maybe the king’s sending an assassin.”

Hyland’s smile wavered when Myuri brought that up.

The possibility of an assassin was what the knights themselves were thinking.

No one would be happy to learn that they themselves were of no consequence.

“Anyway, the knights are out all day today because of the swordsmiths’ and artisans’ festival. We can’t talk tomorrow, either. I really hope I can secure some time the day after, somehow.”

“...That is a long time to wait.”

They were extremely lucky to have been able to talk with Wintshire at

noontime.

“It sure is. A messenger from the second heir might already be on the way as we speak. But knights value promises more than merchants do. If we exchange pledges, then I think things will go well.”

When taking the knights’ reliability into account, it was hard to imagine that Wintshire would so easily overturn a decision already made, even if the second prince tried to lure him onto his side.

“Still, all we can do is wait until Wintshire has a free moment. I want to avoid pushing it and then having the plan exposed to the other knights. And I’ll send a fast horse to the king immediately. The knights are neither friend nor foe, so I’m sure he’s greatly troubled by their appearance. He’ll surely be delighted to hear the good news.”

Even if thirty fighting men were of no use militarily speaking, there was still a symbolic factor to be had. Just as Myuri had said before, a knight that resided in the people’s imagination had the strength of a thousand soldiers.

The king may even be hoping that they leave the kingdom without a big fuss just by letting someone else take credit for the success.

From a long-term perspective, there was also the kingdom’s relationship with the Church to consider, which Hyland had mentioned before.

“But waiting time is not idle time. We still have procedures for the new monastery to take care of. We have lots of things to do, for better or worse.” Hyland offered Col a considerate smile before turning to Myuri. “Did you finish buying all the furniture?”

“Yup. That’s done, and I already gave the bill to Miss Eve.”

“You really are the daughter of a talented merchant, aren’t you?”

“Right? I almost thought about becoming one myself.”

Lawrence would be overjoyed if he heard that.

“However, I have heard that the planned site for the monastery building is on land much rougher than we imagined...”

When Col told Hyland what Sharon had told him, Hyland made a look as

though she had just swallowed something sour.

“I’ve heard it’s been empty for quite a long time, but had been properly tended to...Once Sharon and Clark give me the report, I’ll see if I can recruit some workers.”

Col bowed his head, thanking her for all her contributions.

“By the way,” Hyland said abruptly, in an almost theatrical, suggestive tone. “How did the crest research go? Learn anything interesting?”

She seemed just as, or even more so, invested than they were.

While Col felt delighted that Hyland was so interested in them, he felt uneasy at how Myuri looked at him with such fiery eyes.

“Can I tell her?”

He realized she was talking about the absurd story about the bear. He doubted she would make such a blunder as revealing the truth behind them, but she was clearly desperate to tell someone about the story she came up with.

“Be careful not to bother her too much.”

Myuri took that as permission to speak as she pleased and told Hyland about how there were few crests of wolves, then linked it to the topic of bear crests, then even incorporated the suggestion that perhaps the sheep in the kingdom’s coat of arms had wool that was a bit too short.

Hyland was in a good mood the entire time, either because she was interested in Myuri’s story, or because she was simply delighted to be talking with her.

As Col watched the peaceful exchange between the two, he turned to the crest of the Church hanging on the wall and prayed that the plan they had struck with the knights would go well.

Myuri ultimately went to watch the patron saint festival being held by the sword-related guilds.

There was a chance that a problem might arise in their plan if a knight saw Col and happened to remember his face if he ventured into the festivities, but that

was not the case for Myuri. He had no counterargument for when Myuri pressured him with that logic, and so he bitterly watched her go as she merrily made her way to the event. When he saw her return well after sunset with a wooden sword smugly attached to her hip, he could do naught else but sigh.

The next day, the knights were called to join in celebrating the completed refitting of one of the great trading company's big ships. Myuri, of course, wanted to see the big ship, so it was a given that she wanted to join in the celebration.

Col ultimately lost out to the silent pressure, but with Myuri away, he could continue with his vernacular translation of the scripture in their quiet room. As he thought about how their interests complemented each other, he carried on with his work alone in the room.

When evening time came, a letter arrived from Hyland; she had finally gotten a grasp on Wintshire's schedule for the following day.

They would be holding a special worship service for the clergy who were coming from neighboring parishes, and Wintshire would be attending as representative of the knights. The rank-and-file knights would be attending normal mass, which meant there would be a time in which Wintshire would be without any other knights, just like last time.

The letter said that this was when they would finalize the secret oaths that would put their plot in motion, and set the rough outline of events with Wintshire. Col briefly reviewed the plan—they were first going to hold a public catechism and impress the populace with the debate. By curious coincidence, that was exactly what Sharon had said. It was a scene often found in legends of saints, so Col felt somewhat embarrassed when he thought about himself playing a part on that stage.

"Whatcha reading, Brother?"

"Whoa!"

As Col sat reading his letter from Hyland, Myuri suddenly stuck her head up through his arms. Before he could even wonder when she came back, he scrunched his face up at the smell.

“Oh, Myuri, why do you smell so strongly of fish?”

“What? I do?” Myuri’s ears and tail appeared, and she sniffed her own clothes. “I think it’s because I was getting fed fried fish all over the harbor. It was really good.”

“Good grief...”

Not only that, but there was a dampness to her, perhaps because she had been along the coast, in the salty sea wind all day.

“Go ask for some bath water and clean yourself.”

“Okaaay.”

“Ears and tail!”

Just as she was about to leave the room, she shook her head and hips in an exaggerated manner, hiding all trace of her wolf parts, as though telling him she already knew. Col sighed at her antics and began to write a letter in response to Hyland.

With the Knights of Saint Kruza and the Twilight Cardinal reciting public catechisms, that meant they needed to select subject matter that would be easy for the city folk to understand. He looked through the scriptures, wondering which excerpts would be best, and wrote down potential passages. Wintshire would most certainly have some questions regarding faith he would want to appeal to the public in order to clarify his organization’s position, so Col took care to make it easy to incorporate all that.

He opened the scripture again—he had read it so carefully for his translation work, he practically memorized it at this point. As he poured all the knowledge he had into his letter, Myuri loudly poured hot water into a large washtub, so it took a lot of work for him to stay focused.

Then, as his ink started to run due to the thick steam, Myuri said, “Brother, wash my hair!”

Her clothes were already off, and she was ready. Myuri was totally unashamed, and there was no way Col could draft theological catechisms with her right there. He placed his pen down in defeat and rolled up his sleeves.

“Eh-heh-heh!”

He picked up the soap—a fancy sort that contained perfume, because of course it did. He scrubbed enough for it to start to foam, then began to lather Myuri’s hair; she wriggled ticklishly, and her wolf tail whipped around, splashing water.

The puppy who never left Myuri’s side lay on its stomach a few paces away, perhaps afraid of the water in the tub.

“Oh yeah. I made the chicken watch the cathedral to make sure there’s no suspicious people coming and going.”



“What?” Col asked in surprise, and Myuri turned back to look at him over her shoulder, which was flushed from the hot water.

“Brother, did you think I was just out playing the whole time?”

His silence was his answer.

Her tail deliberately splashed in the water, wetting his foot.

“I was looking for any suspicious people during the festival, too, but I didn’t really spot any there, either. If the bad prince sent someone there, I’d still probably be able to pick them out in a crowd.”

It sounded like a young girl’s boasting at first, but Myuri was in reality a very skilled hunter.

And since she had said all that on top of asking for Sharon’s help, then it was reliable information.

“Things should go well so long as you don’t bungle it all.”

“I may not be able to remember the lines to other performances, but I will be fine with catechisms.”

He was rather worried that he might get too involved.

“Oh yeah, you’d get all into it with the old beardy guys at home, too.”

“You always called it a waste of time, but see how it is serving us well now?”

When Col rinsed the bubbles from her hair, she flattened her wolf ears and stuck her fingers in her human ears.

It was also her way of saying that she could not hear him.

After pouring some of the hot water over her hair a few more times, he lightly patted her somewhat bony back.

“There, now wash the rest yourself.”

“Aww.”

“I need to continue writing my letter. Wash yourself quickly before the water cools.”

With the window open, they would be able to get rid of some of the damp.

He would be able to focus on writing his letter now.

Col continued writing as he listened to Myuri complain as she splashed around in the tub.

Then, she spoke up.

“Hey, Brother?”

He raised his head and turned around to see Myuri teasing the puppy by splashing it with water.

“The knights all looked like they were having so much fun. I hope the boy comes back soon.”

She was talking about Rhodes, the boy who had been entrusted with a letter requesting aid and sent running to the Brondel Abbey.

Col certainly wanted him to get a taste of the enthusiastic welcome the people of the city offered the knights.

“I hope they all make it through this and can smile at the end.”

Myuri bared her fangs at the puppy.

“Indeed,” Col replied, the fragrant smell of the soap tickling his nose.

CHAPTER FIVE



CHAPTER FIVE

The hymnal chorus echoed throughout the cathedral, accompanied by a waft of the sweet smell of frankincense.

It was not only townsfolk who had found themselves in a gloom, unable to attend mass for a long while as the church doors remained shut. The priests and other clergy who came from neighboring areas almost looked like the guests who returned to Nyohhira to soak in its waters after a whole year as they stepped foot into the building and inhaled deeply.

Archbishop Yagine welcomed these priests to the special chapel and made certain they were all safe. The clergy were also immensely moved by Wintshire's presence, exchanging firm hugs. They held their breath in the churches within the kingdom, because they themselves were in a very similar position to the old knight.

Col and company watched from a distance, waiting in the hallway like merchants who were on good terms with the cathedral. They could see from the gaps in the door the high-ranking clergy kneeling on the floor of the chapel, their long robes swishing as they moved. Yagine took the scripture in hand and glanced in their direction through the gaps in the door. Wintshire exited into the hallway a few moments later, and a young priest quietly closed the door as Yagine began to pray.

The old knight turned back to look at the shut door and said, "This is an oasis of faith in the desert to them."

It was not long ago that those of the cloth could not openly walk around within the city of Rausbourne.

Col himself had been hauled off by the tax collectors' association the moment he entered port.

"Can you not say something to make the kingdom open even more churches?"

“Please forgive me, because my answer is that I once thought the exact same thing. However, when considering how the pope might interpret that act...”

Col trailed off, and Wintshire hummed deep in his throat.

On the other hand, he recalled that when he talked about this with Hyland, he had a feeling that he had been on the verge of coming up with a breakthrough. He groped around in his mind, wondering what that might be, but Wintshire spoke.

“He would see it as an attack from the kingdom, yet if the clergy were to open the doors on their own accord, then they would be turning their back on the pope’s suspension order...You have opened the doors of two sanctuaries thus far, but I fear that may be the limit.” The old knight sighed and shook his head “No, I mustn’t dwell on the impossible. We have precious little time.”

“Heir Hyland is waiting for us in another room,” Col said, and walked off; the guards proceeded ahead of him and opened the door to another room.

“Sir Wintshire.”

“I am sorry to have kept you waiting.”

Hyland and Wintshire exchanged a handshake and they took their places at the round table.

“If I may get right to the point, we have but to put together the main points of the proposal.”

Hyland gave a glance as a signal, and another guard, who had been standing in wait, placed a stack of papers before Wintshire.

“In essence, we want to gather the people’s attention by way of a public catechism held by you, the knights, and Sir Col, then turn it into a debate with Father Yagine mediating the discussion. We are also planning on inviting the local nobles through the city council to make it a more grandiose affair.”

Wintshire gazed at the documents Hyland had placed on the table, and asked, “Will you not ask them to participate?”

He was pointing beyond the wall. He was talking about the clergy who had come from neighboring areas.

“We knights do not want more people on our side. They, too, have been laying low, fighting alone and unassisted. I want to share with them the solace of having been able to join the fight.”

Though their very existence was on the line, they were still constantly considerate of those around them.

Hyland nodded, impressed.

“The more that join, the more dignified the event. What do you think, Sir Col?”

There was a hint of mischief to her question.

“I am all right with that. The winner of a catechism is not determined by how loud one’s voice is, after all.”

Both Hyland and Wintshire’s eyes went wide.

They both flashed troubled smiles.

“If only you were our ally.”

Col was about to say that he was indeed their ally, but he stopped himself. He would never be able to be their ally in the truest meaning of the word, and he was a central cause for their dire predicament in the first place.

It was Hyland who spoke up for him before his silence became too apparent.

“Regarding the catechisms, we are hoping to choose topics that would be easy for the city folk to understand.”

“I see that. You found a good one—the angel’s sword and scales, gifted by God. I believe it’s perfect for a city with so many merchants as this one. It would be easy to appeal to the masses that we are figures of justice with our swords, and neutral in the face of God’s faith.”

They were neither friend nor foe to the kingdom—simply protectors of faith.

“How do you plan on questioning me?”

This was not a pleasant symposium about interpretation of the scripture.

He was one who rallied under Hyland, the standard-bearer of a reformation that fought back against the Church.

“The kingdom objects to the Church’s levying of the tithes to begin with. Because it was meant to be a temporary tax collected for the war against the pagans.”

When Col said as much, Wintshire seemed to understand.

“We are indeed the blades maintained by that very tax. That is a sore spot.”

Knights were military power, and they were symbols of battle. Once a war was over, they were nothing more than tools that no longer had use. The pope was so coldly abandoning Wintshire and his men because the war with the pagans was indeed over.

“The city folk may be seized by feelings of repulsion. I hate to say they will be arguing this in the taverns, but they will at least be excited about it.”

They may earnestly want to support the knights, but also harbor irritation toward the Church who keeps levying unfair taxes.

Wintshire ran his hand through his silver hair, which was unlike Myuri’s—a hair color reserved only for the elderly.

“Oh ho. I will need to put my all into this, otherwise we may lose.”

Col could not tell him that was not so. Though as presumptuous as it sounded, he was confident he would win.

Because both justice and the ways of the world were on his side.

And he considered just how cruel that was.

As he stood before Wintshire, he estimated there were about thirty, even forty years difference between them. The older man, who wore a wry smile on his face, most certainly experienced fighting against the real pagans when he was young—a real knight who survived protecting the Church’s faith with his life.

He had refined his faith in the world outside of books, much like Col himself. He most certainly lost many of his comrades and faced unspeakable tragedy in his life. And they emerged victorious in their battle with the pagans.

And so the current was set, and the pagans were chased away. When Col was a child, the war was an event that was but a husk of what it used to be—an

annual event that others called an expedition to the north. And that finally came to an end ten years prior, and the world was now at peace.

Had Wintshire imagined such a thing like this would happen back when the pagans were a real threat? Did he not think that it would be the knights, above everyone else, who would bask in their renown once the pagans were defeated and peace came to the world?

There was no doubt that he never imagined that he and the other knights would one day be of no more use.

“But a battle is more interesting in a disadvantageous position. My men will work better together that way.”

The way Wintshire spoke was somehow in defeat, almost in relief.

Eve had commented on the old knight, saying that he had no hope for the knights’ position.

Perhaps it was because he said *my men* as opposed to *we*. Wintshire thought of himself as a traitor that was playing up to the enemy—a man who was no longer a part of the Knights of Saint Kruza.

“Twilight Cardinal.” Wintshire looked to Col. His eyes shone brightly, freezing Col in place. “I do hope you pull no punches in our exchange. We can fight back and assert our position to the best of our ability for your best efforts. My men feel their footing is unstable, like sand. The sky is clouded over, and we no longer know the way forward. But so long as we have a foe, a clear direction, then they will work together. They can maintain their bonds through this storm.”

Though this whole thing was nothing but a falsehood, it was much better than the entire unit drifting apart.

“I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the first fight in many years.”

The man’s carefree smile stung Col’s eyes.

The debate would be happening the day after next.

The condition was that there would be no retaliation from the king, and Hyland assured them nothing of the sort would be happening.

“But the day after tomorrow, hmm,” Wintshire suddenly said as they were making their final good-byes.

“Is that not convenient for you?” Hyland asked, and Wintshire shook his head in a fluster.

“No. To tell you the truth, I sent messengers ahead when we arrived in the kingdom in search for a place that may take us in. It was no guarantee that the cathedral here would take us, you see. One of them has yet to return.”

“That is...indeed a worry. I will send someone out posthaste to search for them.”

“Oh no—”

As Wintshire began to speak, Col and Myuri exchanged glances, and Myuri spoke up.

“Are you talking about Rhodes?”

Wintshire looked at her in shock.

“We found him on our way to the Brondel Abbey. He was staggering along and had fallen face-first into the mud, but he made it there safely.”

Wintshire covered his eyes with his hand when Myuri spoke of the mud, but it looked somehow like a sign of affection.

“What an embarrassment for a knight...But it is quite like him to collapse in a forward-looking manner,” he said, then sighed with a smile. “He is a trainee that values the ways of the knighthood so much that it even embarrasses me. He would be reliable in our camp in the event of battle, however.”

The way he spoke was much like an old man speaking of his grandchild. The debate between Col and the knights would undoubtedly be a great event that would remain in the annals of Rausbourne’s history. And since this would be an opportunity for the knights to stand in the spotlight once again, it would certainly be a pity if Rhodes was not there to join in.

“I will send out a fast horse immediately. I am not sure if it will make it in time, however.”

“Oh no, oh...How disgraceful of me to trouble you with such a matter.”

“It is not a problem at all.”

Hyland seemed instead deeply touched by Wintshire’s kindness.

Knights joined the religious order of the knights when they became a part of the organization, and they vowed to fight for one another with their very lives.

Their bond was said to be like that of family, and Col sensed now that it was not an exaggeration.

With that thought fresh in his mind, he told himself again that he must do all he can so that they may maintain their relationship into the future.

But when he wondered if Wintshire would still be in the picture, something akin to a black snake took hold of his chest. It slithered around his heart and bit into him, causing him pain. Yet he stood firmly on his two feet, knowing that he must not let the knight’s resolve go to waste.

Wintshire later left the room to join with the other knights; Col and company met with Yagine to briefly confirm how the day of the catechisms would go, and then they left the cathedral.

It was another lively, peaceful day in Rausbourne.

“Brother.” Myuri pulled on Col’s sleeve as they made their way back to the manor. “Can we eat something nice before we go?”

Col could tell that this was not her typical begging for food.

That must have been evident on his face.

“What would you like to eat?”

“You’re letting me choose?”

Whatever Myuri found most delicious would most certainly taste the most delicious.

Despite that thought, Col quickly added, “Anything besides fried fish bones.”

“Aww, but that was good.”

Just looking at it gave him heartburn.

Myuri eventually settled on a very reasonable dish—fried egg and a piece of

cured meat in between two pieces of bread.

But the bread was apparently made by Rausbourne's most skilled baker, so it was an arduous task to purchase it while being jostled by the swarm of eager customers.

But it was most certainly worth it—the bread was soft, perfectly balancing the saltiness of the meat. It was delicious, as expected.

"You're so nice, Brother," Myuri said as they sat on some crates placed in a corner of the busy harbor. "So, was that enough to let you keep fighting?" As she munched on her bread, she asked him, almost an accusatory tone in her voice. It was strange; she was the one all despondent on their way home after hearing about Wintshire's plan.

When Col pointed that out to her, she made a face like he had brought up a time long ago when she wet the bed, and she bared her fangs.

"I get it now that this is the only good option. I couldn't help getting all worried about it. The worst thing you can do in battle is"—Myuri bit into her bread, her right cheek puffing out like a squirrel's—"hesitate. Don't work hesitation into your blade. It doesn't just give the enemy a chance to take advantage of you. It also brings needless pain to your enemy."

The enemy should be cut down in a single breath.

"Your decisiveness scares me sometimes."

The wolf girl, with hair the color of ash mixed with silver flecks, beamed with a charming smile.

"The top knight guy seemed like he wanted to speak his mind at the end, so you should say whatever you like, too, Brother," Myuri said as she ill-manneredly reached into her mouth to pull out a piece of meat stuck between her teeth. "Get all red in the face, spit flying everywhere, lots of yelling. I bet that'll be really exciting." She hunched her shoulders and grinned, drawing up her legs to fold them on the crate.

As she did so, she looked exactly like a company's cheeky little errand boy.

"I think that's perfect, though. A quiet battlefield isn't much of a battle, is it?"

This would likely be Wintshire's last battle. They had to make it as lively as possible, one that would make even Col forget that it was all a sham. When he imagined the scene, the smile that crossed his face was a mix of nerves and sorrow.

He would certainly grow nervous simply raising his voice among a crowd, and he would be facing a real-life, battle-hardened knight in the moment, with rows of formidable warriors waiting behind him.

The Knights of Saint Kruza—a faithful group with tradition, history, and fervent pride.

Someone like himself going up against them certainly made him feel like a woodcutter encountering a sleuth of bears in the mountains.

But he need not succumb to his fears. He simply needed to stay calm and keep looking around.

Because surely, by his side would be a silver wolf, the one he could rely on whenever and wherever.

"If only..."

"Hmm?"

Myuri, who saw Col was once again lost in thought and attempted to use the opportunity to sneak a piece of his cured meat from his bread, looked up.

"If only we had our crest done in time."

"..."

As she pulled out the cured meat, the fried egg slid out, and she caught it with her mouth. She held the odd position and blinked.

"It would have been a nice place to put our crest on display to the world."

Myuri swallowed the egg, licked the remains of yolk and fat from the meat off her fingers, then smiled with glee.

"You're much more of a dreamer than I am, Brother."

He smiled faintly when she pointed that out.

So long as he was with her, he believed that they would be able to face any

foe. Their crest was meant to express that relationship of theirs, so he believed that they would need an appropriate occasion to debut the design.

He imagined them both wearing it, not putting it up on a wall out of sight.

It was a scene from an adventure tale, one that almost made him smile.

In that moment, words that described his and Myuri's relationship suddenly took form. But like a snowflake that drifted off when one attempted to curl one's hand around it, it slipped out from between his fingers.

He desperately chased after it, but unconsciously reached back into reality.

"Brother?" Myuri asked curiously, and Col sighed in defeat.

"My apologies, I thought I had just come across a word that described our relationship..."

"Wife."

"No."

As they bickered, what he had been chasing completely vanished from view.

"Oh, and now it is entirely gone."

Myuri hopped off the crate and said with delight, "It doesn't really matter. Anything's fine." She placed her hands on her hips and looked out to the sea. "Even if that old knight quits the order, he'd still be a knight." The breeze rustled her silver hair. "Just like how that boy was more like a knight than anyone else I know, even though he's still in training."

Myuri was kind and strong. It was only in the beginning that he found it embarrassing to be talked into a corner by the young girl he had raised as his little sister.

Col almost said to her, "As are you," as she stood there gallantly, but his mouth froze in place.

The answer he thought he had lost sight of came back to him all too easily.

It was his relationship with Myuri.

The word was the perfect fit.

“What is it?”

Myuri turned around dubiously, and Col slowly closed his frozen mouth.
And it then stretched into a smile.

“It is nothing.”

“What? No way, you look like you’re hiding something!”

Col decided that he would tell her when things calmed down.
She would certainly be happy about it.

“Arghh!”

They walked back to the manor in order to get ready for the event the day after the next as Col skillfully handled Myuri. For a while, she hit and tugged on his arm, but she finally gave up and came to hold his hand with a pout.

Though he could not seek perfection, he would still follow his ideals to the best of his ability.

He would not go easy in the discussion in the next coming days.
It was as he refreshed his feeling on the matter as they walked.

“Hmm?”

Myuri suddenly came to a stop and turned around.

“What is it?” Col asked.

They stood still, and at some point a stray dog had come up to them; it was looking at Myuri.

It bumped Myuri with its nose on her side.

“Hey, hey, that tickles. What is it?”

“*Ruff.*”

The stray gave a quiet bark, then trotted off. After a moment it paused and looked back at them.

“It seems it wants us to follow.”

Myuri shrugged and walked off toward the dog. The dog then started off as

well, entering an alleyway from the main avenue; they eventually exited the alley and came to another big street.

Myuri looked up at Col, tilted her head, then chased after the dog.

The dog entered another alleyway that ran beside a company trading house, then barked at the area deeper into the alley.

“If you just hid some bones, then I’m going to shave your tail,” Myuri said before slipping through the piles of crates, heading further into the passageway.

Col could tell that she froze in place out of shock.

“...What are you doing here?”

Sitting there, face swollen from crying, was Rhodes.

The stray had realized the knight crest sewn onto Myuri’s sash matched Rhodes’s scent and brought her here. It looked up to Myuri, begging for a reward, so she patted its head and it wagged its tail.

But when Col exchanged glances with the bewildered girl, there came a voice from behind them.

“Who’re you? You know the kid?”

It was a portly merchant with a scruffy, stiff-looking beard, who frankly did not look very kind.

But in his hands he held a wooden plate that on it had a piece of bread and a steaming hand towel.

“Let me through.”

“Oh, of course.”

Col and Myuri stepped aside to let the man pass, and what he held was indeed for Rhodes. He placed the bread at the boy’s feet, and roughly scrubbed the towel over his face.

“Boy, didn’t I tell you a man shouldn’t break down crying so easily?”

When he was done wiping Rhodes’s face, he forced the piece of bread into his hands.

“Um...what happened to him?”

It was difficult for the man to stand again, but he sighed when he did.

“I found him when I went out to buy wool. We came back not too long ago, but his cryin’ was so annoying I couldn’t bring him into the company house. I won’t be able to sell my goods!”

“Were you at the Brondel Abbey?”

The merchant was surprised when Myuri spoke, but he immediately shrugged. Col was also dressed as a merchant, so perhaps the man thought they had passed each other in purchasing the same wool.

“Dunno what happened, but heard the guard there literally chucked him out. Asked the boy and he said he wanted to head back to Rausbourne, so I put him on my cart and brought him here...then he started sobbing on the way back. Pointless. If you know him, couldja take him home with you, please?”

Despite how fed up the man sounded, he had indeed taken the few days to bring Rhodes back to Rausbourne and even prepared food and a hot towel for him to wipe his face with. One must not judge a book by its cover.

Just as the man was about to return to the building in exasperation, Rhodes suddenly shot up.

“Th-thank you!”

The man peered over his shoulder, huffed, then left. Tears poured again over Rhodes’s freshly wiped face, and he rubbed the hand that gripped his bread over his eyes.

“Uhh...What happened?” Myuri asked, and Rhodes seemed to finally realize that Myuri was there. His eyes widened in surprise.

He then burst into tears again.

“The knights...”

“Hmm?”

“The knights are finished...”

It took quite a while to finally calm Rhodes down as he sobbed.

It was only the first day at the abbey that he had been treated courteously, he explained. *Those traitors*, he wailed as he ate the bread he had accidentally crushed.

“After that, their manners were polite, but they interrogated me one after the other. They asked every little detail about the knights...They even asked what sort of meals we ate on the island.”

Though it was likely to confirm that they were truly impoverished, it sounded like Rhodes had other reasons to be angry with them.

“What do you mean by traitors?” Myuri asked, and Rhodes rubbed his eyes with his sleeve before speaking.

“I...thought they would help, so I told them about the distress we are in. Yet after I told my whole story, they asked me, ‘*So does that mean the Knights and the Twilight Cardinal are working together?*’ That would never happen!” Rhodes spat, and the dog snoozing beside Myuri woke in shock.

But Col was just as surprised.

“They said...the Twilight Cardinal?”

“Yes. I cannot understand why. No matter how many times I told them, they would never listen...instead they kept asking me if I had a hidden letter, and even stripped me down. Why would they do such a thing?!”

Myuri stole a glance at Col.

Though they would not go as far to say that having Hyland write a letter for them was a failure, perhaps it would have been best to wait and arrive at the abbey a little after Rhodes. The monks of the abbey were certainly wary of a visitor who bore a letter from Hyland, just as Huskins had been. Even if they did not imagine Col to be the Twilight Cardinal himself, it was natural to think that someone related to him had come to the abbey to inspect for corruption.

That Rhodes had been treated courteously on the first day was also consistent with that theory. They warmly received the messenger from the Knights of Saint Kruza, but it was not long after that people bearing a letter from Hyland appeared. It was much too meaningful for it to be a coincidence. It was normal to suspect they were related somehow, even more so considering Rhodes was

likely to have mentioned up front that their group helped him.

“After they so rudely interrogated me, they shoved my letter requesting aid back at me. They said they would listen to my story again if I could prove I was not working for the kingdom. I—I...embarrassingly, was spurred on by anger, and flew at them. The guards immediately poured in and held me down. Then those traitorous monks mocked me. They said...that the Winfiel company would soon be disbanded, that we were a group with no further use.”

And when he had been tossed out of the abbey like an animal, the merchant arrived. Perhaps Huskins had mentioned a thing or two when he handed over the wool, but either way, the merchant took him in and brought him back here.

But what the monks told him, that his order of knights would soon be finished, did not leave his head the whole way back.

“I hate to admit it, but...everyone knew that...”

It was a long journey from the island of Kruza to the kingdom. They must have stopped at many ports along the way and spoke to many merchants and townsfolk. Though they may have been welcomed everywhere they went, plenty of word of other things must have gotten out as well.

More than anything else, they themselves knew very well that they could train and train, but there was no longer an enemy for them to defeat.

“Our company was not the only one struggling,” Rhodes said absently. “The whole island of Kruza was having difficulties. Every company was receiving fewer donations from their home countries. We even received less of an allowance from the pope. They foresee no war, so it’s a given.” Rhodes gazed at the ground, his tears now dried up. “With less people, at least we would each get more allowance from the pope. They must have thought about that, at least. Feuds with people who harassed both openly and privately never ended, and we could not call the island a place we could trust in. We decided we would rather leave than simply rot there.”

It was also likely that with donations from the kingdom stopped, they could not even muster the courage to fight back.

“People treated us so well along the way, and we acted much more like

knights once we left the island.” Rhodes finally smiled, as though thinking back on those events. “But whenever we left the welcoming stopovers and headed out to sea, I was always met with terrible anxiety. As we bobbed along the vast sea, I felt like we were simply floating in our own hearts. Everyone was asking himself what would become of us. It was hard to imagine that the king would welcome us with open arms. Even if we all went home, there are a lot of us that don’t even remember what our parents look like.” He had not even known what the seasons were like in his home region. “On that boat, under that vast, irritatingly blue sky, I thought, *The only people I can rely on are the people here with me.*”

They were his family.

He wore few, thin layers, walked along a muddy road as the snow melted, and desperately pressed forward despite approaching death’s doorstep all for his fellow knights. And Wintshire, the one who had sent him off, worried over his late return, worried that he might not be able to take part in the activities the day after tomorrow.

Not only were they bound by faith, but they also had strong bonds tying them together as individuals.

It was not just the order of knights, but the Church also had a way of addressing one’s compatriots within the organization: *My brothers and sisters*.

With Rhodes speaking about that before her, Myuri’s eyes widened and she froze. She seemed to even forget to breathe. She was a smart girl—she most certainly realized what this was about. It was the crest that only the two of them could use, and the question of what relation most aptly defined theirs.

They were not siblings nor lovers, not even master and student. Yet their bonds were strong enough that one would risk their life for the other. And he was *Brother*.

Then came the difficult question of what word could describe their strange relationship, and there was one. And it had been right under Col’s nose the whole time. She was a reliable companion who stood beside him, always wary of their surroundings; someone who relied on him at times, someone who occasionally pulled him forward and opened the way for them.

A knight.

Was there any other word that better described the noble and beautiful wolf girl, whose body was encased in fur the same color as a suit of armor?

But when he finally breathed and stopped Myuri as she was about to cling to him, it was not because Rhodes was in their presence. It was because if he was to commit the word *knight* to his relationship with Myuri, then he would not be able to abandon the boy in front of him.

Even a knight-in-training like Rhodes feared for the future of his company, and in a position of partial defeat, Wintshire still commanded his men and came to Rausbourne. There he thoroughly investigated the city's situation, put his wits to work, and singled out faint possibilities that could lead to the continued survival of their group.

The plan was to use their enemy, the Twilight Cardinal, as leverage that would bring their company back into the spotlight. He must have also thought of the easy choice, which was working together with the second prince, and lined up with their grudges. Perhaps that choice may have been more satisfying for them.

But Wintshire chose a plan that would allow his knights to remain true knights. He was certain that he was the only one who could play the fool and play nice with his enemy, something that completely went against the knights' path.

Col had chosen Wintshire's plan because it was better than his other options. Wintshire likely felt the same. Col had made a calm and rational decision, one that would impress even Eve.

It was not the best choice, however. It was not an option that would leave everyone laughing and smiling as the curtains were drawn. He could certainly calm Rhodes here, see him again the day after tomorrow as though nothing had happened, and take part in the catechisms with a serious face.

But once he had a hand in such deception, would he still be able to ask Myuri to be his knight? Would it be okay to introduce such deceit into the crest and all its special meanings he was preparing for the girl who once cried that she was all alone in the world?

Hyland would say that was not right, and he was inclined to agree.

Col had left Nyohhira believing in his ideals. If he were unable to help Rhodes, then it even felt as though his journey would end here. There was no choice for him to not travel with Myuri, and if their own coat of arms alone lit the way for them, then he had to trust in it. He had to trust that there was a way.

And above all, Col thoroughly disagreed that the knights were useless tools. While the pagans themselves may have disappeared, it was not as though those corrupting the faith were gone as well, and he could see them as agents for bringing people back into faith when they began to lose it.

All he had to do was recall Wintshire embracing the priests in the cathedral. The knights were undoubtedly a sturdy pillar that supported their weakened hearts.

Just like the Brondel Abbey, who beat up the boy, there were plenty of priests who only thought of profit for themselves and made matters of faith a secondary concern. They had forgotten about proper faith and worshipped gold—at that point, were they not pagans themselves?

They were exactly who the knights, protectors of faith, should be fighting—

“Should...be fighting?” His thoughts took form in his mouth, and his eyes opened wide. “Ah!”

At that moment, he heard the cathedral bells ringing, and it felt like a key fitting snugly into its keyhole. Something he had only caught a glimpse of as he spoke with Hyland and Wintshire abruptly took form.

There was an enemy.

There were millions of an enemy that only the knights could fight against!

“...Brother?”

Col looked at Myuri, who peered up in worry at him, then looked back to Rhodes.

The knight-in-training was every bit as bewildered as Myuri was.

“Carl Rhodes, was it?” He said the boy’s name, and Rhodes timidly nodded. “My name is Tote Col.”

“What? Brother?!”

Col disregarded Myuri’s shock and continued.

“You may also know me as the Twilight Cardinal.”

Rhodes smiled, thinking it was a joke. But when he realized the look in Col’s eyes, his smile vanished.

He must have at least heard rumors about the Twilight Cardinal’s looks and personal appearance somewhere.

The moment he looked between him and Myuri, it seemed as though his close-shaved blond hair stood on edge.

Wintshire had laughed when they told him how the boy had fallen face-first into the muddy street, noting how like him that was.

Rhodes was most suited to be a knight. He was a stronger knight than anyone else.

“It’s your fault we—”

Just as anger flared up in the boy, blood rushing back into his face, Col spoke.

“I want you to save the knights.”

The stalwartly biased boy was just as stubbornly convinced, perhaps even more so, that he was backed by faith.

Col stared straight at Rhodes, who snapped forward so far that Myuri almost stepped in to stop him, and remained still. Even if the boy did punch him, he was confident that he would not look away.

“I want you to save them. I am in a difficult position. But *you* will be able to do so.”

“Wh-what are you—you’re, you’re the—”

He was on the verge of tears because the one who had saved him was his worst enemy.

Or perhaps his emotions were reacting first to the plea to save the knights quicker than his logical mind.

“Yes, I am the Twilight Cardinal. I have been called the standard-bearer for the Church’s reformation. But there is something even a minor knight such as yourself would have heard of, no?”

“Wh-what do you...?”

There was a bewildered look on his face, unsure if he should be angry or cry, yet he replied with courage.

Col said to the strong boy, “The story of before the Winfiel Kingdom was founded, when the knights fought against the savages here on this island to reclaim their faith.”

“...”

Perplexment had won over the boy, but Col continued.

“You are much more suited for chasing away the corruption of faith from this country than I am. I want you and your company to fulfill this lost role of the knights.”

“...How could—”

“You can,” Col declared, and stood.

He looked down upon the crying boy, crouched in this desolate alleyway.

He extended a hand to the boy.

“Stand, holy knight. You will be the ones to eradicate evil and save both faith and this kingdom!”

Rhodes, still bewildered, stared at his hand.

Myuri then grabbed Rhodes’s hand and said, “Knights don’t cry!”

Rhodes squared his shoulders and rubbed his eyes with all his might.

He was stubborn, honest to a fault, and would get back on his feet over and over again, never knowing when to give up.

The boy had all the qualities of a knight; he defiantly grasped Col’s hand and stood.

“Us knights would never court an enemy.”

A picture of Wintshire's face came to Col's mind.

"But a knight must also be generous to the enemy."

There were very few young men out there who were so well suited for the creeds of a knight.

Myuri was smiling at Rhodes; the boy could even put Wintshire to shame.

"I will hear what you have to say, Twilight Cardinal."

Crossed swords before the crest of the Church.

That was the perfect symbol for the boy.

Knights had a path they could take an active part in. The enemy they needed to defeat had already been there for years.

There was, of course, a reason why no one had dared touch the enemy thus far, and in order to overcome that reason, a just argument that anyone would flinch away from was absolutely necessary. And there was no one else who could use that argument as a shield as the Knights of Saint Kruza.

When Col told Rhodes of his plans, Rhodes made a face that looked like he had seen a toad reciting verses from the scripture.

At the same time, he was vexed that he had not thought of the very idea himself.

Common sense and the ties of obligation always clouded people's vision. One needed the courage to wield the logical option whenever someone said with a frown, *Logically, yes, you may say that, but...*

But Rhodes said that the plan was a perfect fit for him and the knights.

There were things one could do precisely because they existed in an undefined space, as an ally to no one, drifting about as though on a ship with no anchor. There were things that they had to do.

"Should I tell the commander about this plan, then?"

Rhodes was impatient, but the older Col had to be the one to calm him down a bit here.

Carrying out a big plan required behind-the-scenes negotiations, so they

needed to ascertain just how appropriate their plan was.

And so they decided to ask a certain person who would certainly have a thing or two to say when it came to wicked plans that silenced people in the name of reason, and headed for Hyland's manor.

"...Your brother reminds me a lot of your father sometimes."

"Really? I don't think Brother and Father are anything alike, though."

"Despite how empty-headed they seem, they are actually looking at a whole lot more than you expect. And once they've made up their minds, they don't bend. Just like a ram."

Eve and Myuri were bickering about things in one of the rooms in Hyland's manor.

Rhodes was also in the room, and he turned to speak to the two of them with impatience.

"So, what are we doing? I don't think there is any problem with the plan at all."

He was so desperate to carry out justice, and Eve hummed in a teasing manner in response.

"You knights are like cows. You can only see in front of you."

Just as Rhodes, embarrassed, was about to say something in response, Col cut in.

"I got the idea from the grape story Miss Eve told us. I believe she is very skilled at telling those sorts of stories."

The plan he had come up with weaponized this righteous argument to an unpleasant degree. It was so honest that one might conversely call him dishonest for using it. And there was no one superior to Eve when it came to that sort of thing.

Eve then said with a sigh, "That story was about a larger power using a smaller group as a pawn to drag an opponent into the ring of negotiation. What you've just told me is about a smaller group pulling a larger power around by the nose. I didn't think I'd ever lose to you when it came to vicious scenarios."

Eve made a show of her shrug.

“And all your profit’ll come to nothing, too.”

When Myuri said that, Eve turned to Col with narrowed eyes.

“Exactly. All the groundwork I laid with Yagine will go to waste. Just as I thought I’d finally be getting some easy money.”

“I believe you have made more than enough money.”

“Ha!” Eve barked, then looked at Rhodes. “You’re a knight-in-training, right?”

“Yes, precisely.”

Despite how overwhelmed he looked, Rhodes straightened out his posture and replied.

“You be sure to give the people who made a fool of you all a swift kick in the rear,” Eve said.

Everyone there understood what she meant.

It meant that even she thought this plan would work.

“There will be no kicking of rears. But it is time we re-*tail*-iate.”

Eve raised her eyebrows, Myuri laughed, and Col took delight in the joke.

“I’ll be. *There is still darkness where there is a light* is a great phrase. I bet Hyland will feel conflicted about this.”

“You won’t tell the king about us, right?”

Both the Winfiel king and the pope would scowl if they caught wind of this plan. The only one that would want to carry out justice at will was Wintshire and his knights.

That is why they needed to make it seem as though it was Rhodes who came up with the idea. If the king learned that Col was the one who came up with this plan, then he would surely loathe him and declare the Twilight Cardinal an enemy of the kingdom.

“That’s why they say the best medicine tastes bitter. Even if it does cure the illness—there’ll still be some lingering resentment. It’s safest for you to stay

behind the scenes.”

When Eve said that, Rhodes looked doubtfully at her.

“That is what I don’t understand. We will chase out the source of the kingdom’s disease, which would be an honorable result for the pope. Why are you talking about it as though it’s a bad thing? Is it nothing but just?”

Rhodes asked this question because he was straightforward, not because he was a simple child who still lacked experience.

It was right to do what was right, was how he saw it. And the kings and popes who questioned that simple truth were in the wrong.

“Cattle like you that move straight toward justice are my natural enemies,” Eve said, and stood. “Go now. I’m busy counting my gold here.”

The umbrella girl followed Eve as she left, and gave a smile before leaving the room.

Rhodes seemed discontent about Eve dodging his question, but when Myuri successfully calmed him, he reluctantly laid down his arms.

And whether or not Rhodes thought this was a valid plan was beyond question to begin with.

They never had the option to not do it, and how Eve showed no opposition to it was much more important.

“Does this clear your worries?” Rhodes asked, still excited to tell Wintshire of this plan as soon as possible.

“Yes,” Col replied. “What I still need is a little more negotiating, and your cooperation.”

“I’ll do what I can to help for the sake of my company. Tell me what it is.”

Eve had called Col a ram, and Rhodes a cow.

While he was strangely fascinated that it was an apt description, it was also promising.

“So when we get to the cathedral, this is what I would like you to do...”

Rhodes confirmed what his role would be many times, then gave word of his

understanding.

Then, as he was about to leave Hyland's manor, he suddenly straightened his posture and looked at Col.

"...You might be the pope's enemy, but I don't think you are an enemy of faith."

Col was unsure how to answer.

But he believed that words were unnecessary.

He smiled in response, and Rhodes courteously lowered his eyes before wheeling around.

His cape fluttered in the wind, and they watched him set off to the cathedral before them to put their plan in motion, and Myuri wore a slight smile.

"He sure is a knight. Overwhelmingly so, almost."

It was her way of complimenting Rhodes.

"Do you like him?"

Col brought it up first, and Myuri pounded her fist on Col's hip, saying, "I'm thinking."

The pair then set off for the cathedral and went around to the side gate. Col stated they had urgent business with Hyland, and they were allowed inside. As they walked through the hall, encased in cold, stone walls, he took several deep breaths.

"I don't think Blondie will be mad at all," Myuri said, having noticed how nervous he was.

Their plan would render all of Hyland's hard work moot, considering all she did to turn Wintshire's plan into reality. Not only that, but it was very possible that she would be thoroughly scolded by the king in the future.

The king certainly thought that if he could deftly control the knights, then events would progress in a manner that would benefit the kingdom the most. That would mean Hyland let a perfect chance to further the kingdom's interests escape from under her very nose.

Of course, Hyland would quickly realize what future would be waiting for her.

“Well, whether or not she gets angry, I’ll go apologize with you.” Myuri almost sounded like she was talking about a prank they were pulling, and it nearly made Col laugh.

Myuri was the sort to suggest that God was actually a bear, so perhaps everything operating at this level was in the realm of some minor mischief for her.

“It’s all right. Heir Hyland is not the sort to get angry over this kind of thing.”

When he took Hyland’s side, Myuri immediately frowned.

He continued, “After all, Sir Wintshire and the others would most certainly act like the gallant knights they are. It will be wonderful enough that anyone would be willing to let go of their anger, no?”

Myuri looked as though she was about to miss a step on the stairs and gave him a vexed smile.

“Yeah. You’re right.”

She must have imagined Wintshire and the knights putting on a brilliant display. She sighed, giving in to relief, and sniffed.

Col smiled slightly at her response, and she pinched his side.

They made their way toward Hyland’s room, and as she looked at them in bewilderment, wondering what the matter was, they told her the outline of what happened. She dropped the response letter she had from the king in her hand.

“...Impossible.”

That was the first thing she murmured, and she whipped her hand up to her forehead as though she was hitting herself in the head.

“Impossible...Oh, why didn’t I think...”

She cradled her head in her hands. Myuri seemed proud, for some reason.

“...To think something so ironic would happen. What on earth have I been concentrating on?”

Hyland placed both of her hands on the table and fell silent for a few moments.

As a person of status, she must have gone over untold numbers of possibilities.

“As a vassal of the king, then I have an obligation to advance this plan in favor of the kingdom, if it is true.”

That was the first thing she said when she lifted her head.

That option did exist. They could strike fear into the pope’s heart with a terribly advantageous, preemptive strike.

But that would still leave Wintshire and his knights in an uncertain position.

This plan was the only, and likely last thing Wintshire and his men could do to grant themselves a firm position among the vying factions of the Knights of Saint Kruza.

“But I am a servant of God before I am a vassal of the king,” Hyland said, standing with such force that it almost knocked her chair back, and she boldly walked toward Col.

She then gripped his hand with both of hers.

“I will happily take on any grievances the king may have. I do not wish to see someone as wonderful as Wintshire slandered as a traitor.”

“Then we shall proceed as planned.”

“Indeed you will!” Hyland exclaimed. “The Knights of Saint Kruza have marched into the kingdom. They then knock on the doors of rotten churches to make them repent. I could not think of a better idea!”

That was the plan Col had come up with.

Though the kingdom and Church were in conflict, there were of course parts of the Church organization within the kingdom.

Among them were those whose history was longer than the kingdom itself, or those who had enormous riches, just like the Brondel Abbey. Originally, Col would want these unjust practices exposed and brought to light, but that would

force the pope to act in order to defend his organization.

As the kingdom stood and watched from the sidelines for that reason, the second heir was selling off tax collection permits as a roundabout way of targeting the Church's assets. And that, of course, sowed discord between the kingdom and Church, and brought them to the brink of a war.

Then came the Knights of Saint Kruza.

The Knights of Saint Kruza were originally the blade sitting at the pope's right hand, and normally having this unit step foot into the kingdom would certainly mean war. But the ones who had come were all Winfiel natives, and it was because they had lost their place within the knight order. That said, they were not here to surrender to the kingdom, and it was still unclear if they were friend or foe.

Col knew that aspect of the knights could be put to good use.

His plan was to have a group that could be either ally or enemy to both the king and the pope expose the corruption of churches within the kingdom, another group who stood in an ambiguous position in the greater struggle.

Those in power would surely ask, *It is not clear whose side the knights are on; who are they doing this for?* It made no sense to answer for one side or the other, yet there was one answer that would make both sides fall silent.

For faith!

Neither the King of Winfiel nor the pope could complain about that.

"It would certainly be a mixed blessing for the pope. If the knights go on to right the Church's wrongs, then the people would surely sing their praises, and the pope, who left these knights to their own devices, would surely come to think it correct. The pope has a debt to the knights for treating them so coolly, and if this is enough to open the doors of the kingdom's churches, then the service suspension order, the tactic to starve us of faith, would also come crashing down," Hyland said with glee, but she sighed at the same time. "It might give the king a post-nap headache, too. It would be splendid if the knights would expose the corruption in the churches at his feet, and then have the churches go on to open their doors, but he would not be happy if the pope's

approval goes up alongside the knights' popularity. And considering how we were supposed to right the kingdom's churches' corruption ourselves, it's a bit of a shame."

There were good points and bad points for both camps.

Not only that, but Wintshire and his knights never tried to clarify if they were friend or foe.

That is why, for both the king and the pope, they would be unsure if they should either admonish or support the knights for their selfish endeavors, and simply wait and see. They would certainly support Wintshire if he turned out to be a friend, but it would cause irreversible damage if they supported the knights and they turned out to be the enemy.

The ambiguous position had caused much pain for Wintshire and the knights.

Then perhaps it would be all right if they used that ambiguity to give their masters a hard time.

"Thus, the knights will chase corruption from the kingdom's churches as representatives of God. The people of the kingdom will once again make their way to our churches and receive God's mercy. That would give the king a reason to approach the Church aggressively." Hyland counted on her fingers the effects that the knights might cause. "And then the knights will gain renown as bearers of proper faith. The pope will have no choice but to praise their achievements. Because they marched into the enemy camp on their own, heightened the reputation of the Church, and had their way with the people's admiration!" she exclaimed, forming a fist as though grabbing the outcome of the whole ordeal. She paused to take a deep breath, perhaps because she had gotten a taste of the comfortable bitterness that came with such an ironic plan. "I swear," she sighed. "What a tricky little plot. Not even God would have thought of this."

Her exasperated smile was her praise.

But if the plan were to go well, then it would be due to the knights' way of life.

"Everyone believes that Sir Wintshire and his knights would genuinely

conform to faith and do the right thing. This plan would not come to fruition without that trust,” Col said.

They had no malice. Therefore, no one could blame him.

Only the most noble of knights could straightforwardly say what was right.

“But if there is one thing I am uncertain about”—Hyland’s face, flushed with excitement, clouded over as she spoke—“it is if this trainee knight to whom you’ve entrusted this plan is trustworthy.”

This plan balanced name and substance in a delicate situation.

Anyone could easily turn it any direction they pleased by saturating it with malice.

If Rhodes put his mind to condemning the Twilight Cardinal, or even going as far to crush the kingdom, then he could most certainly execute the plan for the sake of the pope by harming the kingdom.

“He’ll be okay.”

It was Myuri who answered.

“What proof do you have?” Hyland asked, and Myuri shrugged.

“Because he likes me.”

It was one of the very few phrases in the world that could hold such persuasive power.

“I trust the Rhodes boy, but I also trust Sir Wintshire,” Col said.

When the old knight hears about the plan from Rhodes, he may suspect it was originally the Twilight Cardinal’s suggestion.

He knew that they once crossed paths, and it was hard to think it natural for the boy to suddenly come up with a plan like this.

But Col was not worried.

“Sir Wintshire is a knight among knights.”

He simply did the right thing in the proper fashion.

“Ah, that’s right. You’re right. I mustn’t be skeptical about that.”

Col and Hyland exchanged glances, and they nodded.

There were trustworthy people in this world.

They were confirming that to one another.

“Okay, great, then it’s settled!”

Myuri cut in, pushing on Col’s chest to widen the gap between him and Hyland.

“I’m gonna let that boy know that we’re putting the plan in motion. Okay?”

Rhodes was waiting in a corner of the cathedral for their signal.

Once he got the signal, he would go straight to his fellow knights.

“He is not *that boy*; his name is Rhodes.”

“*That boy* is fine. He’s a crybaby.”

Myuri coolly drew up her shoulders.

As both Col and Hyland smiled wryly at each other, Myuri grabbed Col’s hand to drag him out of the room, but she suddenly turned back to look at Hyland.

“Oh yeah.”

“Hmm?”

Hyland looked at her vacantly, and Myuri said, “Brother and I talked and we decided on what our relationship is for the coat of arms.”

“Oh!”

Hyland’s face lit up, and Myuri said proudly, “Tell them I’m his knight.”

“...”

Hyland’s face was perfectly frozen, too perfect for even a witch’s sneeze. Myuri ignored the reaction to open the door, pushed out Col, and only left her face in the room on her way out.

“Also, you can use our crest, too. Just for you!”

And she closed the door. Col could only imagine what sort of face Hyland might be making, but he did not forget to give Myuri a *thwap* on the head.

“It is by Heir Hyland’s bestowal of privileges that the coat of arms will be ours, and ours alone. You know that, right?”

“Owww...Sheesh! I know that!”

“Do you, though? I swear...”

They returned to the hidden passage that looked out over the nave.

Myuri immediately plastered herself against the barred windows and looked down at the crowd below.

“Is he there?”

“Hmm...Oh, yeah.”

She stepped away from the window for a moment, then slowly peeled off her top layer of clothing and took her sash in hand.

“Mm...Hey, it’s not coming off—!”

They were supposed to use the crest Rhodes gave Myuri as the signal, but it seemed to be sewn rather tightly onto her sash. She eventually gave up and took her entire sash off.

“Brother, keep my bottoms up.”

“What? H-hey—”

She ignored his flustering as she wrapped her sash around her hand and stuck it through the bars in the window.

Rhodes would certainly notice it right away.

Because it was the promise of reunion that he gave to the girl who saved him when he lay at the side of the road.

“...I doubt they would ever think that I am doing something as foolish as this behind the wall...”

Myuri paid no mind to Col as he kept her trousers from falling; she wildly waved her hand about.

It was as though she were urging bulls to run.

“Oh, I think he noticed,” she said, and finally drew her hand back in. “Heh-

heh, he was so enthusiastic.” She sounded like an older sister as she crossed her arms in front of her chest.

Col wished she would mind her trousers instead of doing that.

“Does everything seem all right?” he asked, since he had been unable to see from his vantage point.

She squinted in the sunlight that streamed through the barred windows and replied, “He’ll be fine. He’s a strong boy.”

Col could not do much else but force a smile; Rhodes would be subject to all sorts of things in the future.

“Hey, Brother, did you know?” Myuri turned around to face Col, her face a brilliant smile. “Knights are so cool.”

“I know that.”

Still keeping her trousers up with one hand, he used the other hand to take the sash from her.

He then put his hand around her slender waist, rewrapping the sash.

Once he finally bound the excess fabric at her hips, he looked at Myuri as she obediently stood there.

“And I hear that you are my knight.”

No matter what sarcasm he directed toward her, she still smiled ticklishly and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Yes. I pledge my loyalty to you.”

This arrangement was exactly the opposite of what it was like years ago, when he would embrace her as she cried.

Though she seemed grown up, he figured that she had simply become more cunning; but either way, she had undoubtedly matured in many ways.

He sighed and hugged her back in a perfunctory manner.

She seemed somewhat displeased with that, but Col made sure to mention, “A knight’s creed includes going to bed early, waking up early, temperance, and diligence, you know.”

“What?”

If he gave the banner alone to the freewheeling girl, then she would run around with a big smile on her face and vanish into the distance. He had to rein her in properly.

Myuri pushed on his chest to separate herself.

“You’re so mean, Brother!”

She bared her fangs and growled at him, and he replied, “Then will you be returning to Nyohhira?”

Her red eyes widened, then she immediately narrowed them.

“Grr.”

She growled at him, then looked away in a huff; Col confidently thought with a smile that there truly would be no better crest than that of a wolf looking away.

As they talked, they started to hear a different kind of buzz coming from the nave below.

Col came to stand next to Myuri at the window and peered down, where he saw Wintshire’s knights gathered, some occasionally pumping a fist in the air. Rhodes stood next to Wintshire; the older knight resting his arm on the boy’s slim shoulders. Rhodes was right in the center of the circle as an important member of the knights.

Whenever Wintshire explained something, it seemed as though the knights’ morale flared up, a decisive will apparently forming around the group. Even though all the knights wore serious expressions with their lips drawn taut, some seemed as though they were about to cry; Col wondered if that was his imagination.

“They say that’s the bonds of knights,” Myuri said, grasping Col’s sleeve.

The nave then filled with keen sounds ringing out because the knights had finally drawn the swords affixed to their hips.

They held their blades up above their heads and brought them together, raising a rallying cry.

Myuri grip tightened as she watched the knights come together anew.

Perhaps the slightly sullen look on her face was because she was jealous of them.

“Are we not every part a knight as they are?” Col asked, and Myuri turned to look at him and grin.

“Obviously!”

Just as the aroma of frankincense began to tickle their noses, the cathedral bell began to toll.

The knights, now with a map detailing their path forward, began to march on Wintshire’s command. Col thought he saw Rhodes glance up in their direction *May God grant them a blessing that suits their faith.*

As he prayed quietly to himself, Rhodes and Wintshire began fervently exchanging words with the other knights. This was the perfect kind of relationship for the Knights of Saint Kruza and the Twilight Cardinal.

Col grasped Myuri’s hand.

When he felt her grasp his hand back just as firmly, they left the cathedral together.

Epilogue



EPILOGUE

When Wintshire heard the gist of the plan from Rhodes, he acted with great precision.

He apparently had a proposal for Hyland, a withdrawal of his idea, and an explanation of what he would be doing next.

Hyland mentioned that it almost seemed like he knew they had a hand in this; it was unclear.

Either way, Wintshire and the knights stood clad in full battle armor, glinting in the spring sun, announcing what it was they intended to do. They were going to knock the churches into shape, investigating any that had kept their doors closed and refused to right their own wrongs.

While the masses had taken issue with the Church, they still knew that the churches were a necessary establishment for their daily lives. That is why they had received the knights' declaration with standing applause; because it could very well change the situation in the kingdom.

So awareness of the knights spread like a wildfire, which would mean the pope would surely have to adjust his own attitude, and they all lived happily ever after...But a dark feeling had Col jiggling his right leg.

"I believe this is necessary, but..."

"You're still talking about that? C'mon, chin up!" Myuri told him, and when he looked up, she placed a colored sash around his neck. This sash indicated the rank of clergy, and since Col was not officially registered as part of the clergy, it was white. But in a way, it was his way of criticizing the Church system.

That was all and well, but Col was still not happy with the position he was in.

Just as he was translating the scripture, Myuri barreled into their room, dragged him out, and shoved him into a carriage without telling him anything. Hyland was already there, and the cart departed before Col could say a word.

He was about to ask what was going on, when Myuri tossed him a bundle of clothes.

It was his normal attire, the priestlike set he had worn when he left Nyohhira—clothes he had not been wearing as of late.

“We thought you might refuse if we talked to you about it beforehand, so I’m sorry it has to be like this.” Hyland, who sat opposite him, said this apologetically, and then told him what this was all about. He did not know who it was that thought of this plan, but he was not going to ask.

Because he knew what was going to happen.

But he felt dispirited when he imagined it happening, and so he had been fidgeting with his Church crest with both hands this whole time.

“But isn’t this easier than a public catechism? I know I probably shouldn’t say this, but you just have to stand there,” Hyland said, surprisingly defensive, much like his gloomy attitude.

Myuri, finished placing the sash around his neck, took a comb in hand and began to run it through his hair.

When she neared him, he realized she smelled a little different than usual—sweet, like flowers. That is when he finally noticed that she was wearing clothes that, though they were not the ones she wore from Nyohhira, they were not the company errand boy ones.

“...You, too?”

She ran the comb through his hair, found a wildly scraggly one and pulled it out, then shrugged.

“Of course. Because I’m your knight!” she declared.

She wore robes that reminded him of a traveling nun.

But what was different was that she had her bright sash, embroidered with gold thread, wrapped around her waist, and a dagger sheath at her hip. He had never seen such a self-assertive nun before.

“I couldn’t get a sword, so I just have a sheath. I’ll need a sword since I’m going to be your knight. Ooh, what kind of sword should I get? Heh-heh!”

“...”

Just as he wondered if it was a mistake to have defined their relationship as knights, he realized Hyland was looking at them.

She was smiling apologetically, and now he had no choice but to accept it.

“I will refrain from doing any more but stand. There should be some knights among them who still do not think fondly of me, after all.”

In fact, the knights’ resuscitation idea was supposed to have been Rhodes’s idea. The Twilight Cardinal was still an enemy of the church and a target for the knights.

And what Hyland had suggested was for him to join the others in seeing them off as they left for the churches in neighboring regions.

“I don’t mind at all. It’s enough, so long as it creates rumor.”

“The Twilight Cardinal, seeing his greatest enemy, the knights, off...Yes, for faith!” Though Myuri herself did not have a lick of faith in her, she said that as she tied Col’s hair back tightly. She sighed proudly. “I would’ve preferred to harden your hair with some egg whites, though.”

“You think? I think it’s nicer this way, it’s natural. It makes him seem much kinder and valiant.”

“You’re right. C’mon, Brother! Stand up straight!”

Hyland and Myuri looked over him, evaluating him, and he straightened his back.

He almost felt like he was essentially a plaything.

“It should be about time...There are so many people outside. We were right to come outside the city wall. This would’ve been impossible to do inside the city.”

The carriage had passed through the city wall at some point, and Col had not realized due to the sheer number of people outside. Everyone and their uncle had come to see the knights off, and there were plenty of people waving homemade versions of the knights’ banner.

“O God, please save me...”

When he voiced a prayer that he rarely ever said, Myuri took his hand.

And she smiled innocently, as though she was telling him to relax.

Though she was supposed to be a knight, someone who challenged and endured hardship, her smile was a satisfactory one, like she was pleased that a prank of hers went well.

“No dinner for you if I see any extra nonsense from you.”

Myuri shrugged, her smile still easy, and she went to help Hyland open the door.

Sounds of the bustling town immediately flooded the carriage, and Col felt his heart clench.

“Come on.”

Hyland exited first, followed by Myuri, and beneath the spring sunlight Myuri extended a hand toward him.

Though he regretted for a moment why he’d ever brought her out from Nyohhira, he grabbed her hand.

Her hand was small, but it was powerful like an adult’s.

“Here they come!”

Hyland shouted, succumbing to the crowd’s excitement.

Col turned toward the city to see the knights headed straight for them.

“Glory to the Knights of Saint Kruza! Blessed be righteous faith!”

The people at the sides of the road yelled in loud voices, scattering flower petals along it.

In the front were two knights atop white horses, carrying deep crimson banners, and behind them were several more knights on horseback. Col spotted Wintshire’s face immediately, and he also saw Rhodes among the knights on foot behind the horses.

“Heh-heh, he looks so proud. Even though he’s a crybaby.”

“That is not something you say.”

Col poked Myuri's head, then took a step onto the small, elevated platform that the carriage driver had prepared for them.

Myuri also stepped up with him and adjusted her clothes herself.

"What do you think, Brother? Am I cute?" she asked, tilting her head. How she acted, plus her clothes, which were a different sort of ladylike than usual, certainly made her seem lovely. He wished she did not have the sash and dagger on her, but he then corrected himself that she would no longer be Myuri without them.

"Yes, yes. Very cute," he said in an almost dismissive manner, and Myuri seemed discontented with that nonanswer, but she eventually drew up her shoulders in happiness.

The cheering of the people soon grew louder; the knights were approaching.

Col received a large copy of the scripture from the carriage driver, tucked it under his right arm, and grasped the Church crest around his neck with his left hand.

He recalled Myuri's comments and puffed out his chest more than normal and straightened out his back.

At first, there was a strange ripple through the crowd. But the ripples finally coalesced, became a wave, and some began to point at him. The knights also realized what was going on and looked up.

It was not long before the flag-bearing horses came near, and a brief second later, Col's eyes met with Wintshire's.

For a brief moment, he thought he saw the old knight's eyes widen in surprise, but they quickly shifted to a look of kindness.

That was enough to tell him that Wintshire had seen through everything.

Perhaps what surprised him was that Col had come to see them off.

Col raised his left hand high, the one that held the crest of the Church, then bowed forward in a posture of prayer.

The knights would simply pass right by him.

Right as he was thinking that, something unexpected happened.

“Ooh!”

There came a cheer.

Wondering what it might be, he unwittingly raised his head to find the knights all with their hands at their chests, looking at him as they passed by. It was the knight’s salute, and they were all presenting it to him.

That meant they knew the truth. He was not sure if Rhodes had spilled the beans or if Wintshire had told them. Or maybe, unbeknownst to him, their fair piety made them do so out of respect to those who came to see them off.

Whatever the true reason may be, the sight lit Col’s heart ablaze, and Rhodes eventually came to pass in front of them. Rhodes was looking at Myuri; when Myuri gave him a little wave, his face went bright red, and the knights on either side of him wore dry smiles.

The knights’ procession passed before them in an instant, and a whole crowd of people was following them close behind, looking for handshakes, touching their cloaks—it was a whole to-do.

Then they vanished like a scattered rain shower, and commotion over the knights seemed so far away.

With a satisfactory sigh, he felt his right hand suddenly grow warm.

“I think it’ll go well,” Myuri said, watching the knights’ silhouettes fade in the distance.

Her hand that grabbed his was gripping harder than usual.

“I think the king will be able to support them openly, too,” Hyland said, and looked to Col. “Let’s go back. I have a table for us at the Golden Fern. I want to celebrate your new coat of arms, too.”

“Meat!” Myuri yelled, and hurried back to the carriage.

Col wondered if he should change before arriving at the restaurant as he turned to leave, but he looked back toward the knights one more time.

The knights’ crest, raised high in the sky, fluttered gallantly in the wind.

May God bless them.

After saying a quick, silent prayer, he sat next to Myuri as she urged him to hurry, placed the scripture on his lap and closed his eyes.

Winter was over, spring had arrived and that was merely one scene of an act in a season of many wonderful days still yet to come.



AFTERWORD

It's been a long while. This is Isuna Hasekura. Time has passed, lots has happened, and another year has come and gone.

This was supposed to come out last year, but I wasn't making any progress on my writing, and now look what day it is. I feel like it eventually took me nearly half a year to write it...It was perfect plot-wise, but when I started writing it out, things got all winding and confusing like a maze, as always. I was told not to make it too serious this time, so I wanted to concentrate on cute scenes with Myuri, but my pen just started writing out apocalyptic scenarios like it had a mind of its own. But in the end, it was worth the trouble, since I think Myuri is the cutest in this volume by far. If you are finished reading already, I'd like to ask, what did you think?

But while I'm glad I managed to write something I am personally satisfied with, the struggle has left scars on my computer folder. I would save a previous version of a file before I made any deviations, so file names would start looking like "Wolf and Parchment Volume 5 Draft 4 Copy copy (1) December NEW ver Copy (3) copy.docx." It's so painful...

In the end, the printed book reached around 200 pages, which meant my composition was no good! So I got a month-plus extension, and two weeks before the deadline they announced the release date for this volume, so there was no going back. It was a similar situation to volume four, but it was much worse this time. I couldn't stand it, so I started writing from scratch. I think it was volume five of *May Your Soul Rest in Magdala* that I rewrote in about ten days, and I was recently thinking about how I managed to pull that off because I was so young, but it seems like I still got it. I don't want to do that again, though. Well, it's more like I've been writing novels for over ten years, so I at least want to write things without too much fuss and actually go according to plot, just once...! The *Spice and Wolf* short stories are going comparatively smoothly, but I end up with many more page rejected compared to a complete

manuscript. Since they're short stories, the time I suffer is simply shorter compared to longer volumes, but the suffering that comes with each page is just as painful...

I feel terrible for making you wait a year for a volume, so next time I will be sure to get a manuscript done in three months! I'm sure I will! I think! Please root for me!

Well, there isn't much different in my private life—which is what I wrote earlier, but around the time I submitted the manuscript, stock prices went wild, and I'm glued to the prices morning to morning. “Dow!” I'll stand. “Dow!” I'll yell. It's a lot of fun. It's been a lot like a chicken pecking at food on the train tracks, building up bit by bit, then coming face-to-face with disaster in a marvelous fashion: Run over by the train just when it's plumpest. Right now, I'm entranced by the Nikkei's double-impact credit purchases...I look, they're going down! They might be saved! That's how my days are going. I'll see you in the next volume.

Isuna Hasekura

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